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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE FIRST writer I ever met was a too-tall Truman Capote look-alike who wrote poetry and taught at the local university. He spoke to my high school creative writing class, and all I remember about him (besides the fact that he was the first person I knew to wear a cravat) were his complaints about being misunderstood by the publishing community. His talk before our class consisted of a long whine about publishing, two even longer poems, and a question-and-answer session in which no questions were asked.

The second writer I ever met had the most amazing talent: he could pick up anything — a paper clip, a ball of sand, a marble — and tell you what it weighed to the gram. He sold non-fiction to local publications, and made a good living...or so it seemed, until the police busted him for selling cocaine. He never complained about the publishing community. In fact, he never spoke about publishing at all.

The third writer I ever met was

a Big Name Professional who came to speak at my college creative writing class. She had an Attitude. At her meet-the-author gathering in the faculty lounge, she refused to answer questions from us wannabes. "You'll never listen anyway," she said. "And most of you will go on to your little nine-to-five jobs, and look at this as your moment of glory. Of course, you'll say you never made it because no one understood your art when the truth is most of you will never make it because you refuse to *learn* your art."

Part of me still harbors resentment at BNP's Attitude. As a professional myself, I justify that resentment this way: she had no idea who was in the room, and she should have been polite. (It should be noted here that I was raised in the Midwest where being polite is a virtue above all others.) But in truth, nowadays my attitude toward new writers is probably harsher than hers.

Every month, I receive about 1,000 manuscripts in the mail. These manuscripts, which I never asked to

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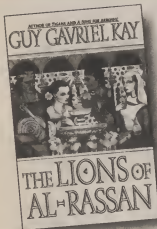
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see, come in all shapes and sizes. Most are improperly done: they are written in crayon on yellow legal paper; they have spiders and other bugs tucked in their pages; or they have paperclips so old that the rust has stained the paper. Another large percentage appear fine until I start to read them: the spelling is abysmal, the punctuation non-existent, and the syntax is convoluted. The final group of the hopeless ones have learned how to handle the mechanics, but they have forgotten to tell a story. I don't care to read about Joe Everyman waking up, shutting off his alarm and stumbling to the bathroom. It simply isn't interesting.

So when I approach those manuscripts, my attitude resembles that of a classical music critic at a garage band rehearsal: I know I'm going to hate this experience unless something miraculous happens.

Imagine, if you will, trying to entertain a woman in an empty room. She has her arms crossed, her nose plugged, and a frown on her unlovely face. She has already made it clear that she doesn't like your inexperience, your pushiness, or your friends. And you have to not only entertain her, you have to entertain her so well that she'll pay you for the experience.

That's me, folks.

Meet the editor.

I am the sourpuss neighbor, the old maid school marm, the nasty librarian whom you must convince to pull her hair out of a bun, throw away the glasses and dance the night away. I am a writer's greatest nightmare.

Or a writer's best friend.

Because once I am entertained, I *will* dance the night away. And the next, and the next. I love a good story, and I love a good writer even more. Once you've gotten past that grumpy woman guarding the door, you'll find a friend who always makes certain you know the back way into the party.

Why am I telling you this now, after we've become such good friends? You didn't want to see my dark side, to know that I've got an Attitude that puts BNP's to shame. But you need to know right now, this instant, before you turn the page.

Because, as you've probably noticed, none of the names in this issue (with the exception of mine and the columnists') are familiar. Every story here was written by a new writer.

And every one of those writers has crossed that barrier. Every one has entertained the grumpy woman in the empty room, and made her dance with joy.

Every one.

I tell you this now so that you

will understand why I believe this to be one of the strongest issues we've done all year. Most writers get in the back door. What that means is not that they get special favors, or that they know the secret handshake, or that they know which kind of chocolate the editor prefers (dark with caramel). What it means is that when they come in, I'm already dancing. I know I like their work. I know they'll entertain me. I know we'll have a good time.

It's the newcomers who have to prove themselves.

There are occasional anthologies of new writers and there is a very good contest run by Writers of the Future, also for new writers.¹ These are good ways for writers to "break in." But they are flawed in one fundamental way: the new writers are competing against other new writers. To be the best in that group is sometimes to be brilliant (Robert Reed and Dave Wolverton got their starts there as the best of the new) but it is sometimes to be merely better than the others (which is to say the only entertaining one in the bunch). At *F&SF*, the new writers must compete against Ray Bradbury, Gene Wolfe, and Kate Wilhelm for space in the magazine.

The new writer's stories must be as good as an entertaining story by someone whose name is already familiar. And, if the truth be told, sometimes the new writer's story must be better.

We're taking a risk here to do an issue of the magazine with only new-writer stories. And I wish I could say the risk was entirely mine. This all happened because Matthew Wells sent us a story called "The Auschwitz Circus" which I liked enough to buy. Our publisher, Edward L. Ferman, liked it enough to assign Kent Bash the cover. Kent's cover—well, Kent's cover speaks for itself. Kent showed the cover to our film critic Harlan Ellison, who called Ed and said it would be a crime to put names over this piece of art. Ed agreed and, realizing that I have bought a lot of new writers, suggested the new writer issue to me.

I wish I had thought of it first.

But I'm the guard at the door. If you don't like a story in this issue, blame me. I'm the one who let the author into the party. But I suspect you'll like these stories. A lot.

I do.

As for those writers I mentioned up front, here's where they stand nearly twenty years later: The

¹New writers, by the contest's definition, are those who have not published a novel, and who have published fewer than four short stories. We use that definition here.

Truman Capote look-alike has yet to publish outside of vanity presses. The non-fiction writer, after a long probation (he was sentenced before the War on Drugs), really started to write non-fiction for a living, and discovered it was more lucrative than his previous profession. The Big Name Professional has an even bigger name now, thanks to several literary awards and two bestsellers. I still think she has an Attitude, but I know now that

her Attitude is one of the reasons she's successful. She has seen hundreds of "writers" come and go. Most never listen and most never publish.

It takes a lot of guts, a lot of hard work, and a lot of persistence to sell a story. It takes even more to make a career.

The folks whose names you see on these pages are real writers.

Let's hope we'll be following their careers for years to come. *H*



"I have a feeling it's something more than just the dawn of another day."

When Michael Martin wrote "Spelunking at the Cavern," he was living in San Francisco, traveling up and down the West Coast selling Marvel Comics to the direct-market comic book specialty stores. He was hired away by Dark Horse Comics in Portland, Oregon — and during the transition (quite literally), he learned of his first short fiction sale. He notes that he owes Harlan Ellison a great debt of appreciation for all of his support.

Spelunking at the Cavern

By Michael A. Martin

IT ISN'T EVERY DAY THAT you run into yourself. The first time it happened to me, I was standing outside a noisy dive on Mathew Street in the

gray heart of the dockside warehouse district in Liverpool. I'd been inside the club only once and already did not particularly want to go back. The din was frightening, and the place lacked even the most rudimentary air conditioning. The sweat of the leather-clad multitudes packed inside ran in dank rivulets down the walls. I hadn't come all the way back to 1958 merely to subject myself to this sort of thing. Unfortunately, the nature of my mission made visiting this place a sorry necessity.

The Critical Incident, the event that would change my subject's life forever, wasn't due to happen until next Tuesday evening and it was now Saturday afternoon. I decided to use the time to reconnoiter, maybe do a little research and reading at the local library, maybe take some photos. But the first priority was to take in a meal.

Across Mathew Street from the Cavern Club lay an old-fashioned British fish-and-chips and beer pub of the sort that had flourished nearly two

centuries ago, which is to say now. The light was dim in the corners of the tiny place, and the upholstery was old. The place stank of stale grease, but none of the other dozen or so patrons seemed to notice. I took a booth near the back and had just picked up a menu when I locked eyes with the man I least expected to see. He saw me, too, and came over to my booth.

"Have a seat," I said, regarding the face that stared back at me each morning from the shaving mirror. He did, and thanked me.

"What brings you to mid-twencen?" he asked.

"Same thing as you, I guess," I said. "Temporal trails. Evidence of time-tampering. You're here, after all. Maybe that's reason enough."

"And I thought I was drawn here by all that stomping they're doing right now over at the Cavern Club," my doppelgänger said with a chuckle. "Are you here from Alternitech, too?"

I nodded. "Publishing Division."

A buxom sandy-haired barmaid laid two pints of Guinness before us. I didn't remember ordering anything. He took a long quaff while I regarded my mug more reticently. I suppose on some of the time-lines of the multiverse, I'm quite a tippler.

Wiping the foam from his lips, he said, "I work on the Entertainment side. Specifically, rock 'n' roll. A & R."

I must have looked stupid, because he added, after a moment, "that means 'Artists and Repertoire.'"

I frowned at the condescension. Sometimes I could really piss me off. "You don't suppose," I said, "that we could both have been sent here from our respective timelines to safeguard the same subject?"

"I don't know," he said. "Let's compare notes."

I reached into the valise I always carried on my time-jaunts and withdrew several paperback books. Old, familiar childhood classics, really. Novels of imaginative fiction with titles like *The Walrus Men*, *The Sun Kings*, and *All Shine On* and anthologies with titles like *Walls and Bridges of the Imagination* and *War Is Over* (with Jerry Pournelle, with a reprint of the original Stuart Sutcliffe cover). My counterpart picked up a book, casually at first, until he recognized the name on the spine. His face registered surprise for a moment, but he swiftly recovered himself. He flipped through all of them, pausing here and there to actually read some of the prose. An attitude of seeming reverence crossed his features as he read.

"I'll be damned," he finally said. "I didn't know he had this in him. I mean, on *my* timeline he wrote a couple of books of Lewis Carroll-inspired nonsense, but never a coherent, sustained narrative like this!"

"What did he do on your timeline instead?" I asked, finally pausing for a moment to pay proper attention to my beer. "The Alternitech you work for must have valued it as much as *my* Alternitech values his contributions to the science fiction field."

My alter ego drained his mug and gazed into the uneven rafters as he composed his answer. "In the words of Dr. Winston O'Boogie, 'you shoulda been there.'"

"Meaning what?" I asked, leaving some money on the table.

"Meaning," he said, "follow me into the little club across the street and I'll show you."

The Cavern Club was just as noisy, sweaty, crowded and close as it had been during my first cursory reconnaissance visit. The place was stuffed with gum-chewing teenagers, leather-clad teddy boys and natty suit-and-tie lunch-crowd types. The stage had just been vacated by what the locals called a "skiffle" band (guitar, bass, and tea chest) as we made our way to a conveniently vacant table near the front. To get a table so near the stage in this crowd, my counterpart must have had some pull with somebody. The band, a scruffy, antisocial-looking lot, was swiftly replaced by another just as we took our rickety wooden seats.

All five of the musicians in the new band were clad in black leather pants and western shirts with string ties. The drummer was a brooding James Dean type, his hair thrown up into a huge pompadour, his expression a narcissistic, brooding pout. A gawky, incredibly young guitar player stood to the right side of him. Beside him stood a slight, intense young man in shades, a bass guitar nearly as massive as himself slung across his slight shoulders. At the opposite side of the stage stood a young man with a backward-strung guitar, an Elvis haircut, and the big puppy eyes of a Japanese cartoon character. And center stage, right before the stage's single microphone stood the man whose life I was here to guide, the man whose career and eventual literary output I was here to safeguard.

My Subject, a man I'd only seen in holos and book-jacket photographs, stood staring down the crowd, arrogantly myopic. I knew he couldn't see

anything without his glasses. I also knew that he was renowned for hating crowds. Maybe not being able to see them made them easier to face. My Subject lifted a black and white Rickenbacker guitar and slung it onto his body, holding it low, looking dangerous.

He counted fast to four and the band began a loud, discordant rendition of an old rhythm-and-blues composition I vaguely remembered from somewhere (remember, I never followed such stuff, at least not on *my* timeline). He sang, or screamed rather, about twisting and shouting and shaking it on out, to an ebullient chorus of du-wops from the too-young guitarist and the big-eyed kid. The audience drank and stomped and danced and hooted and fought. They repeated this response even more vehemently during the second number, whose lyrics consisted largely of a greed-soaked litany of "Money, that's what I want."

I was confused. Sure, my Subject had dabbled in this stuff, this "rock 'n' roll" nonsense, during his art school period, but not for very long. This certainly wasn't what history would one day immortalize him for. Rock 'n' roll would be a mere footnote in his career, really. A curiosity. At least that's the way it would play on *my* timeline.

I had to find out more. I noticed that my counterpart had lost himself in the deep basso pounding and the shrill screaming from the little Fender amplifiers, but there were questions I needed answered. I grabbed him by the arm and put my face next to his ear.

"I can't hear myself think in here!"

I dragged him through to the door, weaving like a bee dancing the location of a cache of pollen, and maneuvered us through the spastic crowds. In the street, and around the corner, I spun my counterpart about to face me.

"Your John Lennon is a *rock star*!" I asked incredulously.

Dusk lay over the English seaport town like a thin, cold blanket. My Other and I found ourselves in a small booth in yet another dockside pub. Two live pints of Guinness, amid several dead soldiers, lay on the table between us. By now we'd decided to trust each other enough to exchange our palmtop computers as we exchanged stories and agendas. After fifteen minutes or so of this, I handed his palmtop back to him and he returned mine.

"So you're saying," I slurred, "that after Lennon's mother dies he becomes embittered and devotes himself entirely to this...music."

"That's right," he said, lighting a cigarette. I wished he'd quit that. "He was never the same after Julia Stanley was taken from him."

"On my timeline," I said, "she nearly outlived him. And Lennon himself lived to a ripe old age. How long does he live on your timeline?"

"He'll be shot to death just after turning forty," he said sadly. "A crazed fan."

I shook my head. "He'd be a lot better off on my timeline."

He sloshed his mug absently, the cigarette dangling from his lip. "So we not only have the same Subject to protect, but the same Critical Incident to oversee."

"Then we have a huge problem," I said. "Julia Stanley must survive whatever you think is supposed to happen to her on Tuesday, July 15, 1958. Otherwise, my Subject will never have the opportunity to write all the books he's responsible for back on my timeline."

"On Tuesday night a drunken off-duty cop is going to drive down her street just a little too fast," he said deliberately, meeting my eyes and holding my gaze as though trying to make his sincerity absolutely convincing. "She's going to be walking home that night from her sister's house. The cop won't see her, and she'll be killed. If you change that, Lennon's adolescence will cascade into completely different and unrecognizable channels."

"I recognize them," I said belligerently.

"The world will never hear about a rock band called the Beatles."

I shrugged. I could see that this meant a great deal to him. But stacked next to Lennon's literary output on *my* timeline the events my counterpart described on *his* seemed rather frivolous. After all, I'd never heard of the Beatles, or the Silver Beetles, or whatever the hell those noisy, posing thugs had called themselves. On the other hand, my Other had never had the pleasure of reading *The Sun Kings*. It made sense that he would be as resolute as I was, given his experience. And given the fact that the man across the table from me *was* me.

"Your Alternitech," he said, "must have an Emergency Procedures Manual just like mine does."

"It does," I said.

He quoted: "In the event of an encounter with another agent from a parallel reality or at temporal cross-purposes with your mission, that agent is to be considered a shoot-on-sight enemy."

"I'm supposed to kill you, too," I confessed levelly, studying him, noting that he carefully kept his hands visible atop the table.

He chuckled. "If the Everettists up in Theoretical are right, then that order I quoted is pretty paranoid. I mean, I'm *supposed* to kill you to keep your reality from wiping out mine. I have to snuff you so the wave-function will collapse in my favor."

I shook my head. "That's pure Schrödinger. Your Everett-followers should believe," I said, keeping my hands on top of the table, "that both our realities lie side-by-side, neither one a threat to the other."

"We're both here from the future, aren't we?"

"Different futures," I said.

"Same present," he said, smiling.

"If Everett was right, there isn't a problem," I said. "If Schrödinger was right, one of us is going to lose the coin-flip. It's one hell of a gamble to stake an entire reality on."

"I didn't say I accepted the bet," he said, his smile falling. "I don't need to know the answer that badly."

"The Everettists didn't write the Emergency Procedures Manual," I said. "The Schrödingerites did. The wave-function is going to have to collapse one way or the other."

He was suddenly all business. "*Maybe* you can shoot some faceless agent from another timeline. But can you shoot *yourself*?"

I stared into my beer and said nothing. I noticed that his hands were still on top of the table.

"I didn't think so," he said. "But put that issue to one side for a few hours. Why not explore this timeline a bit more before doing anything irrevocable?"

I shook my head slowly. We were at an impasse. So for the fourth time that afternoon, I drained my mug, throwing my head back to catch all the foam. Drinking a Guinness was like eating a small loaf of very tart bread. As I put the mug down, I noticed the figure standing near the door. A man in a hat and trench coat. Staring. How long had he been there, watching us?

The man in the trench coat chewed on a toothpick nervously, casting furtive glances toward our booth. He looked familiar, too, but with the hat obscuring his features, I couldn't place him. I nodded in the direction of the man in the coat to point him out to my drinking companion, who abruptly

turned to take a look at him. That must have spooked Trench, since he jerked into motion just then and strode quickly for the door.

One thing a veteran clandestine time-traveler finds annoying is being noticed. Being observed and stared at makes me feel positively undressed. Evidently, my drinking buddy felt the same way and the two of us decided without the need to exchange any words not to let Trench get very far away from us.

Once outside on the street neither of us could see which way he'd gone. But I knew he couldn't have gotten far. I pointed to the south end of the grubby asphalt lane and began to run in the opposite direction. My Other took the hint and ran in the direction I pointed. Splitting up should make our man easier to find, I reasoned. My Other and I could settle our differences later.

Turning the corner and running into a trash-strewn alley, I literally ran into Trench, practically knocking him down. He lurched onto one knee and as he struggled to right himself I saw the little black gun in his hand. He leveled it straight at me and began to rise to both feet. For a single, frozen instant his eyes locked with mine and once again I had that eerie sensation of staring into the mirror.

The pistol jerked with a muffled pop and my forehead seared from the heat of the muzzle flash. At the same time, my trench coated doppelgänger took another bad step, the flap of his coat having somehow gotten underfoot. I seized the wrist of his gun-hand and with a woosh of deflating lungs we sprawled in a flailing heap onto the alley's smelly cobbles.

He tried to knee me in the groin, but I swiveled and he encountered hard hip-bone instead. I wrenched harder on his forearm, trying to get him to open his hand. Needless to say, we were fairly evenly matched.

Then the gun gave another silenced, jerking report.

Sweaty, scraped, and shaken, I retraced my steps through the alley to the front of the pub. My slacks were torn at the knee, the pantlegs slick with blood. Several sailors and rough-looking dock-worker types passed me at the front door, but nobody favored me with so much as a glance. Street brawls were evidently as common here as the gum wrappers and bottles and cigarette butts lining the gutters.

"What the hell happened to you?" asked my Beatle-fan alter ego, from behind me. I spun about to face him. I couldn't stop shaking.

"I very nearly got killed by another one of you. Another one of *me*, I mean. Where the hell *were* you just then?" I started to laugh at the absurdity of it. Could I have counted on help from this Other in the fight? If I'd just now gotten killed in the alley, wouldn't his mission suddenly have gotten a whole lot less complicated?

"Did you kill him?" he asked soberly. I nodded.

My Other closed his eyes as though in silent prayer. Was he, too, imagining the horror of having to kill one's self? "What a thing to have to do," he said at length.

"I saved you the trouble," I said, maybe a little too harshly. I dug into a jacket pocket and withdrew the palmtop computer I took from my dead Other's body.

My living Other seemed to rouse himself all at once, putting aside his horror. "We still have our original difficulty," he said. "I am here to protect and preserve the timeline which produced John Winston Ono Lennon, the leader and founder of the Beatles."

I touched a few keys on the palmtop, watching the screen as the machine booted up. "And I am here," I said coolly, "on behalf of John Winston Gernsback Lennon, one of the greatest New Wave science fiction writers who ever lived."

"It's one or the other," he said. "Simple."

Scrolling through a file on the palmtop, my spine recoiled as though charged with freon. I wondered absurdly if someone were walking across my grave.

"No," I said. "It's not simple."

"What?"

"Who first invented the timefield generator?" I asked.

My Other shrugged. "Who knows? Once it was invented, it must have spread into everywhere and everywhen. I'm sure there are some good theories, but I'm just a perceptive A & R man who can push buttons with the best of 'em. If you need that kind of information, you'll need to consult a specialist from Paleo-Technical."

"And they wouldn't just tell us something like that. The inventor of the timefield would be too vulnerable to timetamperers if just anybody could find out his or her identity."

"Okay," he said.

"So you don't know how to build a timefield generator from scratch?" I asked my Other.

He laughed. "Of course not."

"Me neither. We'll just have to hope he's sharp enough to figure it out on his own."

"What the hell are you talking about?" my Other said, looking perplexed.

The barmaid tried to charge past us, but I stopped her with a piercing whistle. She looked startled. So did my Other when I ordered six Guinnesses.

"Two for you, two for me, two for John," I explained. Then I handed him the dead man's palmtop. "Read this. Then we're going to invite a guest to our table."

John Lennon was smashed before he got halfway through the second pint. He didn't look half as thuggish and threatening as his stage persona, slumped as he was onto the cracked upholstery. He squinted first at my Other, then at me. His glasses were nowhere in sight. Nearly knocking his pint over, Lennon once again picked up the dead man's palmtop unit, turning it this way and that.

"Gear toy," he slurred. "Sort of, you know, like *magic*. Always loved that. Magic, I mean." He pronounced *loved* like *luvved*, very scouse, very working class, and, I thought, very affected.

I stood up, suddenly conscious of my bladder after the copious drinking. "That's it, then," I said. "It's yours. If you figure out how it works and what it does, you'll quite literally change the world."

Lennon smiled disarmingly. "Got that covered already," he said.

"No doubt," said my Other, also rising, looking a bit awed. "One way or another."

Lennon stared up at him a little curiously, just for a second, before going back to his new toy. My Other and I backed away.

After a trip to the men's room, we were outside again, watching the bits of trash blow across the cobbles as afternoon settled into evening. Some of the dock-worker types were evidently heading off for evening shifts. The nattily clothed office types had begun drifting away after the Beatles' last set and were now entirely gone. It was getting quiet.

My Other looked troubled. "Do you think that was the smartest thing we could have done?"

"How should I know? The Manual doesn't cover this. We had to improvise. All we know for sure is that our dead friend came here from some other timeline's version of Alternitech. From the Technology Division."

He nodded.

"And his palmtop told us enough about his mission to make rock 'n' roll and even literature seem trivial alongside the larger issue."

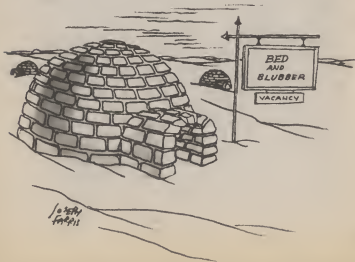
With reluctance, my Other seemed to finally come to terms with our truce.

I pulled my own palmtop from my coat pocket and held it up before my Other in a kind of salute. It vibrated pleasingly in my hand as it powered up, the energies of the timefield washing over me.

"So which timeline survives after we leave the herenow?" my Other asked, I presumed rhetorically.

Does it matter? I wondered. Whatever Lennon's destiny as an artist, I hoped my Other and I had at least preserved the most crucial part of the life of our mutual Subject: John Winston Ono Wells Lennon: the discoverer of practical time travel.

"Goo Goo G'joob," said my Other just before he vanished from sight. ☞





BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Paragons, edited by Robin Scott Wilson, St. Martin's Press, 400pp, \$24.95

Intersections: The Sycamore Hill Anthology, edited by John Kessel, Mark L. Van Name, and Richard Butner, Tor, 384pp, \$23.95

FROM ITS earliest days, the science fiction field has had an unusually intense relationship with its audience. As editor Robin Scott Wilson says in his introduction, "perhaps only rock music and basketball have attracted so many young people seriously bent on imitating the performers they admire." For Wilson, this observation leads into a discussion of the long tradition of voluntary tutelage—formal and informal—that has marked science fiction since the days of the Futurians and their group reading and critiquing sessions, and how this book, *Paragons*, represents a continuation of that honorable history. But

there's something else important to mention about those thousands of sf readers who are also aspiring sf writers: they're the ones who make the existence of *Paragons* (and its predecessor, *Those Who Can* [1973]), possible at all. It's only in sf that we might see a book like this—a compilation of exemplary short stories, with essays on writing by their authors, designed as a kind of teaching tool and introduction for young writers—published as a general trade title. In any other publishing niche, such a book (if it were published at all) would only appear as an academic title, specifically for use in schools or workshops, not marketed to the general readership like any other anthology.

So it's a good thing that *Paragons* functions quite nicely as an anthology as well as a coursebook. Wilson has chosen twelve stories from the late '80s and early '90s by some of the most accomplished writers in the field—Joe Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan—and he's chosen items which

exemplify their strengths: Kim Stanley Robinson's moody, detail-studded "Glacier"; Howard Waldrop dreaming Hemingway in "Fair Game"; Pat Murphy's Nebula-winning "Rachel in Love." But for the latter, Wilson has largely avoided each writer's best-known work, so *Paragons* contains many rarely anthologized stories (Bear's "Sisters," Kress's "The Price of Oranges") that some (if not most) readers will be finding for the first time. And he's also managed to include an enlivening variety of tones and approaches, from the brooding intensity of Lucius Shepard's "The Beast of the Heartland" (which can be termed science fiction only under the broadest umbrella) to Bruce Sterling's madcapsatirical "review," "Our Neural Chernobyl," and John Kessel's hallucinatory "Buddha Nostri Bird." Whenever you're afraid *Paragons* is getting into a rut, Wilson takes a refreshing turn in a different direction, and you're on another stylistic road altogether.

This diversity serves another purpose as well: Wilson breaks the book up into six sections focusing on the major elements of fictive composition: plot, character, setting, theme, point of view, and style. A pair of stories illustrate each element, and by varying the flavor of the selections so much, Wilson keeps these sec-

tions distinct in the reader's mind. Haldeman's "Feedback" we recall as an illustration of point of view; there's no question that Robinson's "Glacier" fell under the heading of setting; and with those associations so strongly implanted, the lessons drawn from each have a much better chance of sticking.

On the other hand, Wilson's cogent introductory essays on each element — nice short rundowns of basic concepts and terminology (from the very basic, such as *climax*, to the less familiar, such as *the method of progressive analysis*) — and the twelve reflective essays by the book's contributors sound a different theme altogether: over and over it's the interrelatedness of the various narrative elements that the writers stress. Wilson mentions "the futility of considering aspects of fiction separately," and one by one his contributors echo his statement. Plot necessarily depends on character — on motivations and fears and hopes — and character can only be illuminated in a setting of some kind, an environment in which to act, and so on. Each part reflects on the others, and can't really be considered (or implemented) alone.

All these pieces — the stories, Wilson's introductions, the authors' commentaries — serve very well as a

primer for aspiring writers. The twelve essays offer insights into the creative process from many angles, and they include some memorable "sound-bites" that writers might want to post over their computers: "The only rule is, make it interesting" says Kim Stanley Robinson. Bingo. But there are many sources for such basic information; the larger question, I think, is what *Paragons* might say about writing science fiction in particular, and thankfully Wilson and his contributors address the matter directly. James Patrick Kelly speculates about the centrality of surprise in science fiction plots. "[S]urprise may be the most special of our effects," he says. "We deal in the shock of the new — and the strange." Greg Bear reminds us that science fiction can take a broader view of character, including the characters of whole societies, species, planets. "Lack of setting is particularly dangerous in science fiction," warns Kim Stanley Robinson, "where the setting is often unvisited as yet," and Lucius Shepard adds that too much of the wrong kind of setting can be just as bad. He compares a lengthy description of a sunset that "goes on for page after page, and includes some amazing detail, but at the end of it you still have no precise idea of how the sunset looked" with

the image of a sunset from a poem by Browning, where in eight words the poet "persuades us to dredge up a sunset from our memory and trans- pose it to his poem." If young sf writers take any single thing away from reading *Paragons*, I would hope it was this — so many early novels and stories lavish paragraph after paragraph of description on their imagined places without ever giving us a tangible sense of them. Eight words can be better than a thousand, if they're the right eight words.

It's this sort of insight that makes *Paragons* so valuable. Each of these writers is a veteran, but more importantly, each one has spent a considerable amount of time teaching the writing of sf as well as practicing it; they've spent more time than most analyzing their own methods and finding ways to explain them to others, and that experience shows through in their essays. *Paragons* is a map of the territory by those who have been there, and who continue to wander its roads. Let them guide you.

No book can be all things in all seasons, however, and *Paragons* is no exception. Good as its commentary is, *Paragons* doesn't include any objective critical takes on the stories to balance the essays by the authors themselves. It would be even more

useful with some analysis by the other writers, or by Wilson himself, getting a little more specific about the mechanics of the stories — I'm thinking now of one of my other favorite instructional anthologies, Robert Silverberg's *Worlds of Wonder*, and how interesting his dissection of other writers' stories could be.

Likewise, it's odd to get through *Paragons* and realize how little has been said about writing workshops; indeed, some writers go out of their way to avoid the subject. "This is not an essay on workshoping," says Nancy Kress, "so I won't discuss all the participants' reactions," and she's perfectly right — it's not the subject of her essay nor of the book as a whole. It's only odd because Wilson was the founder (with the help of Damon Knight and others) of the Clarion Writers Workshop, which has nurtured the talents of many of the field's brightest names. Many of *Paragons's* contributors are alumni of Clarion, and most of them have taught at the workshop as well. It might have been interesting to see what they had to say about the experience.

Fortunately, there's another new anthology that offers a peek at the workshop experience: *Intersections* gathers stories brought to the 1994

Sycamore Hill Writers' Conference, another of the sf field's premier workshops, along with excerpts from the attendees' comments and an afterword by each story's author. Like *Paragons*, *Intersections* needs to hold up as an anthology as well as documenting "a social phenomenon peculiar to the science fiction world," and happily it does. The work consistently equals the high level of Wilson's selections, which may not be much of a surprise, since the list of authors here closely resembles that of *Paragons*. (Five of the contributors to *Paragons* have stories in *Intersections*, and another — Pat Murphy — has been part of Sycamore Hill in years past; at least two of the stories in *Paragons* were workshoped at Sycamore Hill before they were published.)

Editors Kessel, Van Name, and Butner achieve a comparably broad range of tones and approaches in *Intersections* as well, though this is more a gift of fate than planning, since their table of contents was predefined by what stories were brought to the workshop. Robert Frazier's hard-edged, dual-viewpoint biotech tale "Body & Soul" balances Karen Joy Fowler's magical, elliptical "The Marianas Islands" (which is perhaps the best story in the book); Gregory Frost delves into the Victorian obses-

sion with spiritualism in "That Blissful Height" while James Patrick Kelly revisits his radical college days in "The First Law of Thermodynamics"; Alexander Jablovkov blends Greek mythology and the detective story in "The Fury at Colonus," and an excerpt from Carol Emshwiller's novel *Ledoyt* shows us the life of frontier women through her intensely humane lens. You never know what the next story will bring in *Intersections*, and that's at least one measure of a successful anthology.

The ancillary material in *Intersections* offers a very different but just as illuminating view of the creative process: here we get not so much insight into the initial conception of a story (though some of the writers do discuss that also) but an excellent and multifaceted look at what happens next—receiving comments and suggestions from the other workshopers and incorporating them in a rewrite. The quotations from workshop critiques and the authors' afterwords don't offer so much direct general advice on the basic elements of writing, but the lessons are there to be learned at a subtler level; it's very interesting, in fact, to read *Intersections* after *Paragons*, to watch how the various comments reflect Wilson's six fundamental elements, and to see again how you

can't extricate any one of those elements from the rest. But the most important contribution of *Intersections* is the advice it offers young writers on the benefits and challenges of workshops. Kessel & Co. make no bones about the latter in their introduction, emphasizing the "maturity" necessary in accepting criticism and responding to it constructively (and noting that even Sycamore Hill veterans can't always manage it themselves). In the excerpts from critiques we can see how often advice from any two workshopers can be entirely contradictory, and the authors' afterwords yield some insight into making use of them anyway; Nancy Kress writes, "I took what made sense to me and discarded the rest." Virgin workshopers would do well to remember that most stories won't mean the same thing to every reader, and they're not expected to agree with or incorporate every suggestion they get.

The benefits of workshoping come as clear as the problems: every writer here got significant, worthwhile help from their critiques, and consider their stories improved by the process. But it's far more than such immediate practical help that brings them back year after year to Sycamore Hill: as the editors put it in their introduction, "A good workshop offers you the chance to grow as

a person as well as a writer"; Robert Frazier recalls the "heat" of the experience, "one week of sleep deprivation and serious talking about prose"; Mark Van Name says, "Growth as a writer, a better story, great times, and intensity, so what if it hurts a bit? It's a deal I'll take every time." Many of the writers stress the importance of the "great times" at least as strongly as the value of the critiques and shop talk: "Writers spend a lot of time alone in their rooms," say the editors. "A workshop offers them a chance to spend some time with their peers."

Intersections makes the perfect companion for *Paragons*, and together they're a very effective introduction to the ins and outs of the writing life — far more helpful, I think, than most of the handbooks and how-to guides on the market these days. One of the most interesting things that emerges from reading the two of them is the importance all these writers place on the process of revision. They talk about it as a given, even with

stories they don't take to workshops, the best place to apply the critical terms and insights taught by *Paragons*, they say, is in the second draft, when you look at what you've written and try to see how it's working, and how it's not. Some of the stories in *Paragons* and *Intersections* were written over a period of months, or even years; James Patrick Kelly may be the most extreme, having been trying to write "The First Law of Thermodynamics" ever since his college days, but he's not alone in trying several times before finding the key that breaks the story open. Together these books leave the aspiring writer with a genuine impression of how difficult a task it is they've embarked on: "There are a hundred ways to go wrong," the editors of *Intersections* tell us, "and many fewer ways to go right." Admitting that is the first step in navigating the treacherous shoals of fiction writing, and there are few better charts to those waters than these two books.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Tales from the Brothers Grim and the Sisters Weird, by Vivian Vande Velde, Harcourt Brace, 1995, 128pp, \$17.00, Hardcover

A GOOD fairy tale can't die. You can do a Disney whitewash on it, tell a jokey "Politically Correct" version (as in the recent popular series that seems to be front-racked in every bookstore one might care to enter), recast the characters as you wish, recast the plot to further your own agenda, recast the background into whatever setting comes to mind...in other words, you can pretty much do what you like with them, but the story lives on. Not simply the way a book lives on after a bad movie has been made from it ("They didn't ruin my book; it's still here on the shelf"), but in its own right. Over the years there have been wonderful, awful and indifferent retellings, but the stories themselves carry on, retaining their resonance because of how deeply

they are rooted in our subconsciousnesses.

So whenever I see some new collection of retold fairy tales I'm not too worried. I know that the original stories will survive. And because I grew up with them (willy-nilly, they're part and parcel of my inner landscape), I'm always curious as to how a new version will read. From Angela Carter and Tanith Lee, through to the authors collected in Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow's ongoing series that began with *Snow White, Blood Red* back in 1993, everyone has their own take on fairy tales, which rather proves the point that if you give ten good writers the same plot, you'll get ten wildly different stories.

I've borrowed the plots of more than a few fairy tales myself, usually resetting them in a more contemporary setting, but I have to admit to a particular fondness for reading versions that stick to the more traditional storyline, the difference being in perspective, in who tells the story.

Which is why I was delighted with Vivian Vande Velde's new collection for all that its garish cover put me off.

In her retellings, the heroes are the villains, the villains the heroes, and some of the stories certainly tickle the funny bone. But, and this is of great importance, they're still good stories in their own right. They don't exist solely for the shock value of how elements have been reversed. So Rumpelstiltskin wants to help the miller's daughter, the wolf is Granny's best friend and they both abhor Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel are psychotic twins driving their poor kindly stepmother to distraction....

Not every piece is entirely successful. A few (such as the APB on Goldilocks) are rather slight, while her "Beauty and Beast" offers no new insights, but when she's on, she's an utter delight. Her "Jack and the Beanstalk" is a wonderful example of how a different point of view can utterly change our understanding of a story while still presenting the same set of facts.

The funniest part of the book is the short section where Velde offers up a few fairy tale endings we're not likely to see, my favorite of which is: — Snow White and Sleeping Beauty simply refuse to get out of bed.

The Black Dragon, by Chris Claremont & John Bolton, Dark

Horse Comics, 1995, 184pp, \$17.95, Trade paperback

Set against a realistic medieval English background, *The Black Dragon* tells the story of a Scots border lord, James Dunreith, returning to his homeland after the death of Henry II who originally exiled him. No sooner does he set foot on English soil than he is immediately caught up in court intrigues involving a possible revolt against the crown, to which he still feels loyalty.

Sent by the Queen to investigate the loyalty of Edmund De Valere, an old friend, Dunreith is joined on his journey by another old friend, the loyal and somewhat mysterious Brian Gryphon, and De Valere's daughter Ellianne. Their subsequent arrival at De Valere's keep sets into motion events that will affect all of England — both the mundane, and the fantastical otherworld of Faerie that borders upon it.

Yes, Faerie, for the story is a satisfying blend of historical fiction and high fantasy. Figures from folklore and history abound, creating a delightful mix of fact and fancy, effectively mirroring the minds of the people at the time. So Robin Hood and Friar Tuck are here, as are denizens from Faerie, but so are Eleanor of Aquitaine and King Richard (the

latter's presence felt, rather than seen, as it is in most of the story cycle surrounding Robin Hood).

But the strongest influence on the book, perhaps, is neither historical nor high fantasy so much as Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, for *The Black Dragon* is a graphic novel, beautifully illustrated by British artist John Bolton. In the hands of a less-accomplished artist, this could well have come off with the same dreadful homogeneity of the Conan comics endlessly published by Marvel. But Bolton has a more attractive style than that: part Howard Pyle and Foster (the knights, the background, the court scenes), part Arthur Rackham (the Faerie), perhaps even part Jack Kirby (the demons), but it's also very much his own — the sum of his influences combined with his own excellent linework and sense of storytelling.

That this graphic novel first appeared in 1984, yet still maintains its verve and resonance as it's reprinted now in book form, some twelve years later, is testament to not only the timeless attraction of the story, but also the skill of its creators, who chose to tell it in their own way, rather than jumping on whatever bandwagon was popular when they wrote it — a lesson many current graphic storytellers might do well to remember.

The Tattooed Map, by Barbara Hodgson, Raincoast Books, 1995, \$22.95, Hardcover

Lydia and her traveling partner Christopher are on one of their trips — this time to North Africa. Lydia is an inveterate traveler and it's never made entirely clear why she travels, though one gathers from the text that it's as much for a love of being elsewhere and meeting new people as for anything else. She's also an inveterate collector. Her apartment at home is filled with paraphernalia and her journal — the book in hand — collects together not only her thoughts of North Africa, but also maps, old photos, tickets stubs, little handwritten notes and all sorts of wonderful things for us to snoop through, much as we did with Neil Bantock's delightful "Griffin & Sabine" books.

Christopher is another matter. He comes across in Lydia's journal as a bit of a cold fish, traveling for business (he finds curios and antiques in out-of-the-way places for those with the money to pay) one would assume, since he appears to take little interest in where he is, or who he meets. Things begin to change the morning Lydia wakes with a circle of flea bites on one wrist — or at least, with hindsight, we can see that this is where the change begins.

The flea bites slowly evolve into the tattoo of a map that no one can see except for Lydia and a mysterious Moroccan man she meets. Eventually, Lydia realizes that she has to trace the route on the map, and that's where her portion of the journal breaks off.

Christopher knows of none of this until her disappearance. He is given her journal — found in a café where she was last seen — and reads with growing dismay the obvious delusion she fell under. He might not be the most observant of men, but he would have noticed the tattoo. Later, when he develops film that Lydia took, he finds pictures of her hand in amongst more traditional tourist fare; there's no tattoo on her hand in the pictures either.

Christopher has taken up writing in the journal now. When Lydia fails to resurface and he's done all he can to find her in Morocco, he returns home, but discovers that he can't shake off the riddle of Lydia's delusion and what happened to her. Eventually he searches her apartment for clues, begins to look into the books she was studying, becomes so absorbed in his search that he forgets

his disinterest in people and places. Finally he returns to Morocco and then one day he gets a series of flea bites on his wrist....

I've gone on at such length describing the plot of *The Tattooed Map* because simply speaking of the style of the journal entries, or trying to describe all the curiosities "pasted" into the journal itself, doesn't convey how well Hodgson takes us from a mundane travelogue (albeit to a wonderfully described exotic locale) into deep mystery. This is a richly textured excursion, as fascinating in the sections before the mystery begins where Lydia describes their travels as it is once the tattoo begins to take shape. The prose as "written" by each of the characters resounds, each with its own individual voice, and the manner in which Hodgson lays out her plot, while unorthodox in terms of most novels, becomes a fascinating and gripping journey the reader will not want to end.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.





BRIEF REVIEWS: BOOKS

Richter 10, by Arthur C. Clarke & Mike McQuay, Bantam Spectra, 1996, 370pp, \$22.95, Hardcover

IMAGINE what would happen if someone could predict earthquakes. Not just when and where, but how much damage they would do, right down to which parts of which buildings would remain standing. Now imagine what would happen if that same someone raised a false alarm. Lewis Crane has done just that, but then he discovers the mistake in his calculations and learns that an even bigger quake is only months away. Do people heed his revised warning? Is the Pope Protestant?

Richter 10 is much more than a simple disaster novel. It's a well-crafted picture of life in the twenty-first century, when America is quite literally coming apart at the seams. It comes complete with political intrigue, religious wars, and the captivating personal story of the man who could pull the teeth from one of

mankind's deadliest enemies — if only people would listen to him.

Project Farcry, by Pauline Ashwell, Tor, 1995, 384 pp, \$23.95, Hardcover

Project Farcry opens from the viewpoint of Big Sword, a grasshopper-like alien telepath, standing guard against the Huge Ones who have invaded his planet and are threatening his People's pods. The Huge Ones, we soon learn, are a human expedition on Big Sword's planet who aren't even aware of his People's presence. The expedition leader's son, Richard Jordan, is the first to make contact with Big Sword and his People, thanks to his own psychic gift which has done nothing but get him into trouble until now.

Ashwell's new novel is an interstellar adventure story tackling everything from first contact to a planet trapped in another dimension. It is *Project Farcry*, a Research and Development division investigating claims to have produced methods of interstellar communication which

discovers Richard Jordan and telepathy as a form of FTL communication. *Project Farcry*, the novel, explores space through the far reaches of future history in a slower-paced style reminiscent of classic science fiction, while at the same time offering unique insights that will intrigue the modern SF reader.

The Tranquillity Alternative, by Allen Steele, Ace, 1996, 320pp, \$21.95, Hardcover

The more things change, the more they stay the same. In this alternate world where the exploration of space (among other aspects of every day life) has taken a different path from our own, the end results are eerily familiar. Once a glorious quest, space is now routine. Worse yet, it's boring.

Due to lack of funding and public interest, NASA is forced to sell the lunar outpost, Tranquillity Base, to a German conglomerate. But before the Germans can take possession, the U.S. has one final mission: to destroy the nuclear missiles planted there two decades ago at the height of the Cold War. Sounds simple enough, but somebody on board has other, more deadly plans.

The Tranquillity Alternative is a great space thriller. Steele has lots of fun tweaking the events of our

lives, from the cultural aspects of movies, television and music to the politics and breakthroughs in space exploration. Best yet, you don't have to be a technical junkie to enjoy it.

Aggressor Six, by Wil McCarthy, Roc, 1994, 256pp

Aggressor Six is one part *Starship Troopers* sf military action, one part old-style *The Outer Limits*-style psychological suspense. Like apples and cinnamon, the combination is simple but satisfying.

The alien Waster armada has swept through several of Earth's interstellar colonies, and is now entering the solar system. Earth's only hope may be "Aggressor Six," five people and a dog, who, with the help of cybernetic implants, are trying to think and live like a social group of the aliens.

The seams occasionally show on this promising first novel, but McCarthy cranks up the tension so effectively that the reader hasn't time to notice. The final solution may ultimately be too simple and obvious, but the road getting there is just fine. Recommended.

Endymion, by Dan Simmons, Bantam Books, 1995, 480pp, \$22.95, Hardcover

For fans of the ground-breaking *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, the appearance of *Endymion* is good news indeed. Some two and half centuries after *The Fall of Hyperion*, the young Raul Endymion is recruited to rescue eleven-year-old Aenea when she comes out of the time tombs. Everyone knows when she's due, and Father Captain Federico de Soya is given the job by the highest authority of the Church to capture her at all costs. Raul (using a flying carpet!) gets her first and the chase is on. Raul, Aenea and a blue android named A. Bettik flee de Soya and Pax troopers in an intelligent ship that will be familiar to readers of the first books. But this book is a lot more than a chase through space and

rejuvenated "farcasters."

The shrike is back (of course), and the TechnoCore is lurking out there somewhere. Raul tells us right away that Aenea is the messiah, and it soon becomes clear that not all of the story will be told in this book. The novel is a perfectly satisfying read all by itself, but in this case, it's good news that there will probably be more.

The book is full of adventure and wonder. There are problems to solve, and the people solving them are fully realized characters. Federico de Soya, for example, is not a bad man. Raul is a young man the reader will want to spend some time with. *Endymion* is the real stuff. Science Fiction at its best. Highly recommended. ☞



"Have you tried non-fat milk?"

Fiction writers often have a wide variety of jobs before they make a living off their fiction sales. Sometimes the writers already have writing careers — nonfiction writing careers. Amy Sterling Casil is one such writer. Her nonfiction has appeared in women's and literary publications. Lately she has concentrated on her short fiction. She went to the Clarion Writers' Workshop, and she was a finalist in the Writers of the Future contest in 1995.

To make ends meet, she works as the Executive Director of Family Service Association's Home Again Project. She lives in Redlands, California with her husband and daughter.

Jonny Punkinhead

By Amy Sterling Casil



OUTSIDE MY OFFICE, I HEAR the rubbery squeal of a wheelchair, followed by the damp exhalation of a sick child's sigh. The shadow of the pumpkin-headed boy, Jonny, crosses the wall like a dark hand slapped on a sheet.

"Come in," I call through the open door.

"Sure, Dr. Arlan," Jonny says, lisping. It sounds like "Sssir, docker awrin," but I'm used to the way he talks.

Jonny wheels into my office. He's very limber with the chair. In his hand is a small, crooked paper Santa and something else that I can't quite fathom, made of festive paper. I finish the letter I'm composing and smile. It's not easy to smile at Jonny.

He holds the paper Santa up. "I made this for Grandma," he says.

"That's a great St. Nick," I say. My mouth twists in a funny way, and I don't like the feeling. His grandmother hasn't visited him for at least three years, yet Jonny makes her something for every holiday. Her presents are all in a shoebox, tucked neatly in his cubby in Dorm A., where the seriously ill children live.

"This is for you," he says, holding out the other bit of artwork. I see now that it's pieces of paper, cut and pasted to look like a Christmas present.

The little present has "I love you, Dr. Arlan" written on it in spidery letters. "That's a great job, Jonny."

In a fit of the unprofessionalism which seems to have become my habit of late, I push away from the desk and walk to Jonny's side, then kiss his patchy scalp. Jonny giggles and kisses me back. If I look in his good left eye, which is large, brown, and very pretty, I can pretend for a moment he's a normal child. He turns toward me as he laughs, and it's impossible to pretend any longer.

Jonny's third eye stares vacantly. He can see only from his left eye, not the one on the right or the one in the center of his large, flat forehead. I gently stroke his veined head, which is twice as large as the head of a child his age should be, and I whisper that his grandmother will be very pleased with his gift.

Someone has named the syndrome from which Jonny suffers Webem syndrome. It's not a common birth defect, but it's one of the more unpleasant conditions children have come to suffer from in this, our pestilent age.

I'm Hedrick Arlan, forty-six years old, a doctor of education, not medicine. I've been the administrator of Southern California Sherman Institute for Differently Abled Children for six years. Jonny is nearly seven. He and I arrived at this place on the same day. He is a part of the landscape, like our chairs, molded in solid hunks of indestructible plastic, the mottled gray composite floors, the nurses, the aides, the everpresent medication and the constant stream of visitors who want to gawk at the children.

"Gramma is coming," he says, spraying my face with his spittle. "This year, I know she'll come."

"Of course she will," I say. The lies fall so easily from my lips these days. I pat Jonny's twisted back and watch him wheel slowly from my office, waving goodbye with one tiny six-fingered hand.

Jonny's family signed him over to the state and has forgotten he was ever born. Part of me understands their distress at bearing such a child into the world. Another part of me knows the history and I can't help but feel a nasty stab of fury in my gut, because Jonny's mother drank daily during her pregnancy, and took every drug she could find in staggering quantities.

Was it the drugs that made Jonny what he is? I don't know. They say the virus which altered Jonny's genes is both sly and opportunistic. The thing at

work inside of him found a dirty needle somewhere or came through a perforated condom, that much we do know.

When I first came, my friends would ask, "How can you stand all those little children, suffering?" They said this in a disbelieving tone that really meant, "I can't believe you're taking care of those wretches."

Now, they ask less often.

Years ago, Sherman housed developmentally disabled children, the ones they called "morons" and "imbeciles." But no longer. This disease Jonny has, the DNA thief, started a decade ago. The initial wave of the stricken didn't fall ill, so most of them didn't realize that anything was happening, while the tiny bit of protein that saw them as a universe of meat lodged in their gametes, multiplied itself, *changed things*. Then, they bore children. Children with something worse than missing limbs, or hydrocephaly or spina bifida or muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy.

These children were born with bizarre defects, like Jonny's; a head sized and shaped like a great jack-o-lantern covered with patchy hair, extra fingers, extra toes, a spinal deformity that rendered him paraplegic and the ultimate horror, a blind, filmy, goggling third eye.

Then there were the children with no eyes, merely a nose hole and a gaping maw for a mouth. The children with three arms and a tail, with fishy scales and slit-eyes, the ones with fins in place of hands and feet.

And the horrible irony was that most of Sherman's charges were of normal intelligence. No gravely mentally disabled among them, these children were born with the ability, though they might not have even had eyes with which to see, of knowing how different they were, and one day perhaps realizing that despite all their pretty names, like "differently abled," they were what most people called monsters.

I know the histories of our children, save the few found in dumpsters or on some church doorstep. Most are inner city kids, many of them brown or black or golden under their fur or scales. Jonny is black.

On certain nights, when I wake in a sweat at three in the morning and trudge to the patio for a cigarette, because my wife Monique will not allow me to smoke in the house, I wonder if God forgot all these children, while they grew in the womb. Why did he gift them with these deformities, why not merely with old-fashioned spina bifida or muscular dystrophy or retardation or fetal alcohol syndrome?

This virus, it's like Blake's scaly angel of death, coming for the first-born sons of the Egyptians, their parents waking to find their beloved children dead. Blake's angel, drawing his foul gossamer wings over the lintels of all the parents of all the children of Sherman.

It's the poison in our lives leaking out, I think, as I drive home to Monique and my lovely girl Karen, who is fifteen and blossoming and perfect in every way, fierce poison leaching from the evil that is our modern lives, destroying and twisting genes, changing babies into monsters. It's the vile despair of the inner city, the hopelessness, the cruelty, the poverty, writing itself large and making itself manifest, opening itself to the cruel, blind dance of proteins, amino acids.

I've left Sherman, and I'm pulling into the pizza place, to bring home a treat for Karen. We like pizza. Monique is on a diet again, and if I don't bring something home, Karen and I will be stuck with pot pies, and I can't bear the thought of that.

I'm still thinking about Jonny and his absent grandmother as I park. I don't notice the guy in the lurid pink minitruck backing out. He squeals to a stop a few inches from my bumper, gives me the finger and yells something ugly. I ignore him. It's not safe these days, getting into something, even in this bright minimall in my well-to-do neighborhood. The stink of his screeching tires stings my nostrils as I get out of the car. It smells like gunpowder. It smells like death.

Karen gobbles a piece of pizza, then kisses me on my cheek, before rushing out the door with one of her friends, Gina or Gia, I can't remember which.

"Cheerleader practice, Dad," she says, by way of explanation.

So, I'm left with Monique, who has settled in with her nail polish and a romance novel. I watch the news until it sickens me, then try to read some mystery novel that Monique had purchased and tired of.

I'd hoped I could talk with Karen about Jonny. Karen had always shown an interest in the children, even when she herself was a young child. She's such a bright girl, so sensitive. But, I thought, she's growing up. She's out more often than in. My friends tell me all teenagers are like this.

Monique's face is porcelain smooth as she reads her book. It's as if nothing has touched her over the years. I've put on more pounds than I care

to count. My face is lined, my mustache peppered depressingly with gray, and I wear what we used to charitably call "old man pants," yet Monique looks barely different than the day we married. There's no point in talking to her about Jonny. She doesn't even remember his name.

Monique has closed the book and is filing her nails. "Karen's at cheerleader practice," I say.

She nods and murmurs something. I can't quite hear her.

"Tomorrow the Governor's wife is visiting with some people," I say. I hadn't meant to tell Monique about this, but something is pressing me to talk to her this evening.

Monique puts the nail file down and looks up. "Really?" Her cold blue eyes brighten.

"They're coming at eleven. We've got a musical program planned."

"Oh, I'd love to come! Can I just show up?"

"Sure." I wonder why I haven't said something earlier. Everyone has invited their relatives, at least those who are interested in the Governor's wife. Monique should be there. It would look strange if she wasn't.

"That's so exciting. Why didn't you tell me earlier?" Monique is pouting. Several lifetimes ago, I found that expression fascinating.

"It's been so hectic. I forgot, I guess."

Monique shakes her head. She picks up her book.

"Jonny made another ornament for his grandmother today. He's expecting her for Christmas," I say, then I open my book.

Monique pushes her hair back and smiles. "Hed, what should I wear? Do you think the cream suit, or the red jacket, for Christmas? What do you think the Governor's wife will wear?"

I pretend to read. I think I tell Monique to wear the cream suit, and a holiday pin. It doesn't matter. She'll look fine. She always looks fine. Everyone tells me what a beautiful wife I have. I'm glad she wants to see the Governor's wife. Monique is very lovely. She sits in her high-backed, beautiful chair and the light falls across her face, highlighting its delicate planes and perfect features. Her lips curl in a tiny smile.

I can't imagine ever touching her again.

I'm color-blind. That's why I had so much trouble recognizing Jonny's holiday gift. One of the only colors I can truly see is yellow. Perhaps that's why

I love Sherman's auditorium. We painted it in shades of yellow and orange, to mirror the Southern California sun.

Monique walks beside me in her cream suit as I lead the Governor's wife and her entourage on a tour of Sherman.

After the first dorm, the Governor's wife's smile looks forced, as if she'd set her face that way and now couldn't change. She's not a young woman. The lines in her forehead deepen with each child we visit.

A tiny vein in her neck starts throbbing when we visit Dorm B. We see the twins, Kyle and Kieran, getting their daily moisturizing bath. It's important for the boys' skin to be kept moist. Their scales flake away and leave large raw patches without daily treatment.

"Oh, what has happened to them?" the Governor's wife whispers.

"They call it congenital ichthyosis," I tell her. "The skin thickens into scales. The boys also have rudimentary gills."

I pat the attendant's arm. She's a great, dark-skinned woman with a brilliant smile. The twins giggle and squirm. "This is their favorite part of the day," she says, in a voice that echoes her native Venezuela.

The Governor's wife asks the attendant a few questions about the twins. I see pain and horror in her eyes, as the boys smile and coo. "You're pretty," one of the boys says. He's talking to Monique. I turn, and my wife looks as though she's eaten a dried-out lime.

I mutter about how the boys are very affectionate.

"How can you stand it?" Monique whispers through gritted teeth.

I just smile. We say goodbye to the attendant and the twins. It's time for the program. I don't want to be late.

We enter the sunny auditorium. The children have colored butcher-paper banners. Their theme is "What I Want to Be When I Grow Up, Santa." The banners show nurses, doctors and railroad engineers. There are no cartoon characters among them. Sherman's children are blissfully ignorant of violent superheroes and insipid cartoons. The pictures remind me of what we used to draw as children, when we believed that nurses and police officers and fire-fighters were heroes.

The Governor's wife smiles again, a more genuine smile. Jonny's class comes to the stage. He is in the front. They sing "Jingle Bells" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." When they get to the chorus of "Hark the Herald Angels," Jonny sings "Glory to the newborn King," in a high, sweet, slightly bubbly voice. The Governor's wife claps. Tears glisten in her eyes.

I reach over and grasp Monique's hand. She purses her lips and draws away.

"Oh, his eyes! What would cause that?" the Governor's wife exclaims.

I tell her the name of his syndrome. She shakes her head. Jonny approaches the microphone. "All I want for Christmas is to give my grandma a kiss," he says. The Governor's wife makes a little choking noise, and puts her hand to her mouth. Monique sits still, beside me. The muscles in her thighs are tight as steel cords.

"Will his family be here for Christmas?" the Governor's wife asks. I shrug. Jonny and his class wheel away, amid the applause of the staff and the teachers and the Governor's wife. Monique claps her delicate hands like a doll someone has wound up and set to performing.

The younger children come on stage. They have prepared a mini-Nutcracker for the Governor's wife.

The Governor's wife asks, "Who's that darling girl?"

"Little Gyla," I tell her. Gyla is four, nearly five. She's dressed as a tiny Snow Queen, though under the costume she is covered with soft, silvery fur. Her face is heart-shaped, with a sharp chin and a rosebud mouth, her head covered with short fur, save two tufts above her temples that mimic a puppy's ears.

Monique leans near and whispers, "You've never told me about her."

I shake my head. "No, I suppose I haven't. Gyla is a very happy girl."

"What is the matter with her?" The Governor's wife's eyes are narrow, questioning.

"She's a lycanthrope. It's possible she could bite another child. We may have to isolate her, if her ..."

"That's horrible! She's really very pretty, in an odd way," Monique says. Her mouth is a tight line. I know what she's thinking. She's thinking, what if Karen had been born like this little girl?

Gyla's parents were poor Mexican people, Indians, from a state they call Michoacan. Her mother worked in the garment district in Los Angeles, before Gyla was born. After a series of foster placements, she came to Sherman. She speaks with the accent of her foster parents, who were also from Mexico.

"She says she wants to be a ballerina," I say to the Governor's wife. I pronounce it as Gyla does, "bayareena."

Tears stream down the cheeks of the Governor's wife, marring her perfectly powdered complexion, as the program draws to a close. I touch her

elbow. She stands and claps beside me, as we all do. "What can I do for them," she says, as she dabs at her eyes with a tissue. Monique is pressing at her arm, muttering how pleased she was to meet her. "What would they like for Christmas? What would they really like?"

My mind whirls. What would the children like? Would the children like band-aids, to put across their weeping wounds? New bodies? New skin? The removal of excess eyes and digits and limbs? Should we get video toys for the blind children, music disks for those who can't hear? Could the Governor's wife purchase acceptance for them, a society that wouldn't stare?

"Socks," I hear myself say. "The children need warm socks." The Governor's wife asks how many socks are needed.

I tell her there are one hundred and five children, and it would be nice if each child could have two pair, one white, and one colored. Even the children with fins and flippers can use socks.

The socks are promised before Christmas. The Governor's wife kisses me lightly on the cheek, and her handlers lead her away. As she leaves, I feel a tug at my jacket. I look down, and Jonny is beside me.

"Will you call Gramma?" he asks.

I smile down at him. "I'll call her. She's giving you socks for Christmas, Jonny," I say. More lies. So simple. I kiss him atop his sensitive head, which is very warm, and Monique and I leave the auditorium.

MONIQUE SERVES me coffee on our patio, which is furnished in the style of wrought iron favored in New Orleans. The cup is hot, the coffee steaming, its aroma delicious. Monique makes a magnificent cup of coffee.

"Why did you tell her socks?" she asks as she sits beside me. She has her hair in a sleek ponytail. It makes her look like a young girl.

"They need them," I murmur, as I sip the coffee.

"You need a break. Tell the board you want a week off. Two weeks. Let's get away. Karen can stay with my sister." Monique's expression is serious. She pats my hand. It feels as though she's touched me with a warm mitten.

I pull my hand away. "I can't leave now. The staff is continuing class through Christmas. The kids need me. They haven't got homes or families. Jonny still ..."

"Jonny be damned! Aren't you worth something, Hed? You can't be his father! I'm sorry for them, but they've got to learn to accept what they've been

given. Don't pretend to be their father. It's not helping this Jonny. He needs to know there isn't anyone there for him, there isn't ..."

"How can you be so vicious!" I slam my coffee cup on the table. Ceramic shards spray across my lap, along with most of the coffee. Monique gasps and backs away. I wipe at the mess with the napkin. The look on her face is terrible. I've frightened her.

"You need some time off, Hed. I mean it," she says, and starts toward the house.

"Wait," I say. She turns. I remember how it was for me, long Christmases ago, waiting at our apartment window for my father. My mother always said, "Maybe he'll come." Years and years of it, until at last, I didn't go to the window. And he still didn't come. Perhaps that's why I feel this way about the children. Perhaps this pain is why I can understand their pain. Monique looks at me, questioning.

"I'm sorry," I say. "It's because I spent so much time waiting for my own father."

"You told me what happened," Monique says. Her pale, shiny eyes narrow. "Your mother was too weak to tell the truth, that your father had another family and he'd stopped caring for you. Don't make the same mistake with these kids. I may not know very much about the professional parts of your job, but I do know one thing. Lies always hurt more than the truth. Always." Monique swiftly gathered the ceramic chips and spilled coffee with a napkin before she went back in the house.

"Maybe you're right," I called after her. Monique's unexpected insight disturbed me. Long ago, I had thought that she loved me. But it had been so long since she was there for me, so many little hurts gathered together, that I couldn't remember the way I had once felt. I rested my chin on my cupped hand as I surveyed our pristine yard.

"Tell the boy the truth, Hed," she called from the kitchen window. "And ask for that time off. We need it."

Perhaps I would ask. Jonny's face appeared in the back of my mind, demanding my attention, like a credit card bill I couldn't afford.

I walk beside Jonny as he wheels to his dorm. I've told him that his grandmother won't be coming for Christmas. Snot streams over his upper lip. His third eye rolls aimlessly, the way it always does when he's angry or upset.

I feed a steady stream of tissues from my pocket into his left hand as he steers the chair with the other hand.

"I can't believe it, Doctor Arlan," he snuffles. "Why won't she come?"

I keep walking, but the chair slows, then stops. Jonny turns. Now comes the hard part. "I don't know," I say. This isn't a lie. I not only don't know why she won't come, I don't know where the grandmother is. All of our letters and notices came back unopened. Her phone was long ago disconnected.

"I remember her," Jonny says. "She said she loved me. She gave me candy."

Though Jonny hasn't seen his grandmother since he was three years old, I believe that he does remember her. Many of Sherman's children have exceptional memories. "I know she did," I say. "Maybe she's sick, Jonny. Maybe something has happened to her, and we can't get in touch with her, to ask her to come."

"You didn't try! You don't care!" Jonny wheels away, furious. My hand is caught in his wheelchair and a large piece of the skin on the back of my hand leaves with him. I swear softly and put my hand to my mouth, then trot after him. Some of the aides stop and stare. I wave them away as I grab his chair.

"We did try, Jonny. Maybe something has happened to her. You have to understand ..."

"I don't understand! You just want to keep us here. That's why nobody ever comes, because you're afraid they'll take us away!" Jonny stares at me, his face slick with mucus and tears. His right eye, which is as blind as the one in the middle of his forehead, is cast off, fixed somewhere on the wall. The eye from which he sees gazes darkly, fiercely, at me. I turn away.

"Sometimes people have things happen," I say, my voice sounding as feeble as I feel. "My own father never came to see me at Christmas. I waited for him, time after time, but he never came. I wish someone had been able to tell me not to wait, then, the way I'm telling you now."

"You always lie," Jonny says. "You told me Gramma was coming last year, and she didn't come. Now you say she can't come."

His face is full of childish anger and pain. I try to kiss him atop his head, which is lolling forward at an alarming angle, and he pushes me away. My sore hand throbs. He hits me in the ribs and that hurts, too.

"I hate you," he says in a toneless voice. Then he starts down the hall. His wheelchair creaks softly.

I murmur soothing things as I follow him to his dorm. He doesn't respond. His left arm dangles as he manipulates the chair with the other arm.

He enters the dorm and slowly, painfully, transfers from the chair to his bed. I watch through the security window. He doesn't cry. Finally, I turn away. I'll remind the aides to give him something special for Christmas, perhaps a drawing set. He enjoys artwork. I'm told his pieces are very colorful, though they all look gray to me.

Monique has done the Christmas tree in silver and white. She's obsessed with the new. I remember my childhood trees. The same little toys, the same fading tinsel, the hundred beloved objects, some paper, others glass or plastic, which my mother and I hung with care. Monique adores glamorous trees, the ones with each brand-new ornament carefully matched. Last year, she informed me that the tree was pink and burgundy. At least, I think, as I sip my eggnog and watch our fake gas log fire, I can tell that this year's tree is silver and white, all the varying shades of the paler portion of the gray scale.

Karen is off at some church program. They're making stockings for poor children. It bothers me that she's gone, and I'm alone again with Monique. How old was Karen when Monique began decorating the tree? Five, six? Jonny's age. Was that the age when children began to lose their sense of magic, their trust in the love in the world? I swirl the nutmeg atop my eggnog, then swallow the whole sweet mess in one gulp.

I pour myself another eggnog and add a stiff slug of bourbon. The phone rings. I stay in my chair by the tree, staring at the fire. Monique is in the kitchen. She can get it.

I hear her voice. She sounds frightened, or angry. Her face is white as she brings me the phone. "Here," she says, thrusting it at me. The antenna stabs my chest. I adjust it and lift it to my ear.

It's the charge nurse at Sherman. Something terrible has happened. They've called an ambulance.

"I'll come," I say. "I can be there in ten minutes."

"It's Jonny," the nurse says. My heart skips a beat. My foot slips a little on the thick rug as I stand. Monique glares.

"You're not going down, are you?" It's not a question.

"I have to. It's an emergency," I say.

"You're drunk. You can't drive. I'll drive you," she says.

Suddenly, I don't want her with me, her accusing eyes, her porcelain face. I push her aside, grab my keys and I'm out the door. I speed through our quiet

neighborhood, and I'm at Sherman within ten minutes. I park crookedly in my spot and run into the building.

The charge nurse greets me. She leads me toward Dorm A. "I'm sorry, Dr. Arlan," she says. Her voice is breathless, rushed. "We had a new aide on duty. Christmas Eve, you know. All our experienced people have the night off. He came from a place for autistic children."

We're drawing closer to the dorm. Children are crying. Some of them are screaming. Nurses and aides crowd outside the dorm, peering through the security window. The charge nurse calls out a warning, and the crowd parts. We enter the dorm.

"I can't understand why the ambulance isn't here," she says. Jonny is in his bunk. His leg twitches feebly. I see a huge, dark splash on the wall, his bedding and hair stained the same color. The stain is a rich, deep gray, nearly black, the color of blood.

"What has happened to him? Has someone ..."

"He was beating his head against the wall. All night long. The attendant let it go on, because he was used to autistic children. He didn't realize what could happen."

"He didn't realize how delicate Jonny was," I whisper. The coppery, sickening smell of blood is everywhere. I push the physician's assistant away from his feeble searches with a stethoscope, and touch Jonny's shoulder. It feels cold. He's bled a tremendous amount, and there is a gaping hole in the side of his head where he must have been hitting the wall. I can see the delicate membrane inside, see where it has torn and the blood and tissue has rushed out. His third eye and the other blind eye stare at me. His one sighted eye faces the bloody bedding.

I want to run, but I keep my hand on his shoulder. "Jonny," I whisper. "Jonny, I'm sorry." Then, someone's strong hand grasps my shoulder. A paramedic. The ambulance has finally arrived.

"Move aside," the paramedic says, then he gets a good look at Jonny and swears under his breath. "Who the hell bashed this kid's head open?" Then, he sees the third eye and looks toward me, questioning.

"Webern syndrome," I tell him. The paramedic's partner brushes by and moves a gurney toward Jonny's bunk. The noise of their radios, their equipment, and their chatter is disorienting.

Someone pushes me in the small of my back. Yet another paramedic. "You need to step aside," he says. I do, and the charge nurse follows. They lift

Jonny's tiny body from the bed to the gurney. One of the paramedics grimaces and looks away for a brief moment. Even they're not hardened to boys like Jonny.

"He's not going to make it," I say, to no one in particular. Then, they're wheeling him through the crying children. The blood spreads across Jonny's bunk like the wing of a huge black crow.

"We need to call the counselors in, for the children. Look at them," I tell the charge nurse. The ones still in bed are agitated, flapping their fins back and forth, kicking their stubby flippered legs. The children who can walk are gathered here and there. I hear some trying to comfort the others. One piping voice says, over and over, that Jonny's going to be okay. Even so, I can't get the memory of his head, split like an overripe pumpkin, from my mind.

At seven-thirty, the shifts change. I'm returning to my office when someone hands me a portable phone. Monique is on the line.

"We're not waiting for dinner any longer," she says. "Karen's very upset."

I hear sobbing in the background. "I can't come now," I tell her. There is a long silence.

Monique sighs. "I'm giving you two hours. If you're not home by then, I'm taking Karen to my sister's, then I'm leaving for Cabo. I may not ..."

"Jonny's been taken to the hospital," I say, the words rushing out. "He might die. There's massive trauma."

"There's trauma at home," Monique says. "What can you do for him? There's no point in staying." Her voice is icy.

"You don't understand."

"I do understand," she says, very slowly. "You're killing yourself, Hed." Someone touches my sleeve. One of the nurses. I hold the phone away. She wants me to go to another counseling session, then check in with the children in the dorm. I put the phone back to my ear, but the line is dead.

There were more counseling sessions. I oriented the third shift. Then, the hospital called. Jonny was dead. They had not been able to repair his thin, spongy skull. Could I notify his family?

The board of directors keeps a small wet bar in their meeting room. I keep the key. Call his family. I laugh, bitterly, as I open the doors to the wet bar and pour myself a scotch and soda. I've brought in plenty of ice, from the children's ice machine.

The night wears on. More scotches, more sodas, between conferences with the counselors, the psychologist, the new charge nurse. The ice is gone, and my coffee cup is nearly all scotch, just a splash of muddy institutional java. Amid a meeting, I stand awkwardly, mumble something, and rush for the restroom. As I relieve myself, I see my aging belly hanging miserably. It's gray, gray with dark hair on it, as gray as I feel. I slump against the cold enamel wall of the stall for what seems like an eternity, before I finally leave.

Instead of returning to my office, I stumble into the auditorium and sit in one of the folding chairs. They've kept the decorations up, the ones the children made for the Governor's wife. Firemen. Nurses. Doctors. A little train engineer. The fireman held his fire hose between flipper-hands. The nurse had a third eye, very nicely drawn, with long curly lashes.

I stare at the figures, until they split and dance before my drunken eyes. My stomach rebels. I'm afraid I'm going to be sick, and stagger from the auditorium. I avoid Jonny's dorm, and return to my office. I call home. No one answers. There is nothing on the machine. I put my head down, just for a moment, and sleep takes me.

The morning charge nurse wakes me. She has pale hair, braided tightly at the nape of her neck. "A message," she says, flinging a piece of paper on my desk.

The message is from Monique. "We opened presents by ourselves. I've gone to Cabo for a week. Karen is with my sister."

I stare at the bit of pink paper. It's Christmas Day, and Monique is gone, my darling Karen is gone. I crumple the message and look at the gray, hard-carpeted floor. My mouth quivers. Something hot and wet hits my hand. I am crying.

As I cry, I hear someone at the door. The nurse again? I can't face her. Her eyes accused me of something, when she left the message. Of what? Killing Jonny? Abandoning my wife and child? The door opens a crack, and I hear a tiny voice, asking to come in.

I sniff back the tears. It's not Jonny, but a little girl. She enters, and touches my leg. Gyla, the little dancer. She has something in her hand.

"I made this, Doctor Arlan," she says. She holds out a pretty white ornament, with my name written on it in silvery glitter. She climbs into my lap.

"Thank you," I say.

"You're crying." She wipes the tears from my cheek with her silver-furred hand. I sigh, and draw her head toward my chest, and stroke her between her tiny pointed ears.

"I'm sad."

"You're sad because of Jonny," she says with a child's simplicity. "We're all sad too, but we think he's happy because he went to heaven."

I nod my head. I can't speak. She nestles against my chest. She is wearing tiny, cheap tennis shoes that look like ballet slippers on her delicate feet.

"I'm going to dance in all the ballets, when I grow up." She gives me a big hug.

Her face is a perfect little heart, with lovely pale eyes and a sweet rosebud mouth. Karen looked like that, when she was this child's age. A perfect angel. Gyla's silvery fur is very beautiful. It shines in the dim light of my office.

Gyla does not need these cheap tennis shoes to dance in, I think. She needs slippers, real toe slippers, with ribbons that lace around the ankle. Not pink, but silver to match her silvery fur.

"I'll get you some real ballerina shoes," I say. I pronounce it "bayareena," as she does. Children deserve their dreams. I shall not break Gyla's dream by telling her she pronounces ballerina incorrectly. I stroke her soft fur, and the nape of her neck. She is almost purring. What a lovely child, my little girl. I feel her heart beating against my chest.

"I'll be a beautiful ballerina, and everyone will love me," she whispers.

"Oh yes, my dear," I say. "Everyone will love you." Gyla kisses me on my rough cheek, but she seems not to notice the stubble. How easily the lies come. How much like the truth they seem.

Gyla kisses me again, harder. It feels like I've cut myself with a razor. She moves away, and I see something dark on her rosebud mouth. I raise my hand to my cheek, then look at my fingers. I see blood, as dark as Jonny's blood. I put my fingers to my lips. The blood tastes salty and sweet.

"Mustn't do, my love," I say. "Ballerinas don't bite."

Her little brow wrinkles, beneath the fur. She looks at me, wide-eyed. "No?" It is the Spanish no, more question than statement.

I shake my head and hug her once more. "You will have slippers and dresses and tights and everything a little ballerina should have," I say. "Everyone will love you."

She feels like a quivering bird in my arms, as she nestles against me, and I rock her in my lap, crooning a little ballerina song, a song she will like, my little girl, my angel, my dear one.



"Sitters" marks Michael Libling's second sale to F&SF, but it is his first appearance in the magazine. Why are we publishing the second before the first? Well, because we're saving the first for our annual baseball issue in a few months.

For nearly twenty years, Michael has made his living by writing nonfiction, promotion, and advertising copy. His first fiction sale was to a British anthology.

About the story, he writes, "As parents, my wife and I always tended to hold our daughters' hands a little tighter whenever we would see [the posters of missing children that appear in rest stops along the Interstates]. And then one day, I began to wonder: with seemingly so many missing children reported, what if some of these disappearances had no earthy rationale?"

Sitters

By Michael Libling

SOME THINGS YOU NEED to keep to yourself. Sometimes, it is wiser just to go with the flow. It is certainly safer.

"Daddy," she said, "there's a clicking in my head. Click, click. Click, click."

The way the kid was flailing about in the water, shrieking and carrying on, our first thought was shark attack. That's what most everybody else seemed to think, too, because anyone who had been in the water was now on shore, gaping, pointing and cataloguing revolting details to pass on to friends and relatives.

We stashed our tuna sandwiches and cranberry sodas back in the cooler, dipped celery sticks into the cheese dip to tide us over, and trotted up to join the crowd to watch the girl get eaten by the shark.

Usually, I would wonder how anyone could wade, let alone swim, in these frigid Maine waters, but this day the waves wrapped themselves easily

round my ankles and withered warmly between my toes. Perhaps something had pushed the Gulf Stream waters off course. There were no reports of approaching hurricanes; then again, you never know.

"Her name is Annie," said Rachel, between crunches of her celery. "We were playing Frisbee together." Kath and I held our daughter's hands a little tighter.

A woman, panicking as only a mother might, splashed into the surf, heels kicking, arms stroking the air, reaching for a dive that was taking too long to come. A lifeguard caught her chest-high (overly eager, I thought), and his partner helped drag the woman back to safety. Her screeching alternated with her daughter's, filling any stray patches of silence the ocean failed to claim. The combination reminded me of gulls wrestling over fries and battered shrimp tails at the canteen trash can. It was then I realized there were no gulls about, save for a trio hovering quietly in an almost wait-and-see mode at the far end of the beach where the new cottages begin, right above Paul Blankenship's, as a matter of fact.

"I think if it were a shark, she would've been gone by now," said the lifeguard with the better tan.

The other lifeguard agreed. "Don't see any dorsal fin or blood in the water neither."

"I say we go then," said the first.

"Yup," said the second.

But they did not budge. They stood staring along with everyone else. I thought of taking action, but it did not go beyond that.

Then Rachel said, "Look, there's Mommy." And the next thing I know, my wife and the girl's mother have grabbed a rubber dinghy and bounded into the surf. Before I could summon enough wind to call Kath back, they were off and rowing. As luck would have it, an outgoing wave shot them right to their quarry, almost knocking the poor kid over, but she managed to keep her balance as she stumbled to deeper waters, armpit-high now.

Kath extended her oar and the girl grabbed on. A short struggle, a couple of heaves, and they hoisted her aboard.

The crowd applauded. The lifeguards frowned.

Kath rowed frantically as the surf reluctantly tossed them back to shore.

The lifeguards tried to restrain the crowd as the two women carried the girl onto the beach. The girl and her mother wore the same rainbow-striped bathing suits.

"Give her air," the tanned lifeguard shouted. "Somebody call for an ambulance."

"I'll begin the CPR," said the other.

But the girl's mother blocked their way. "Touch her, and I'll scratch your eyes out," she warned.

"Or worse," added Kath, brandishing an oar.

"But we have authority here," the lifeguards blustered with no trace of authority.

Kath was on her knees, smoothing the girl's dark brown hair. Her head was propped upon Kath's thighs, her body rigid, eyes open but frozen dead-ahead, her chin tucked into the hollow of her neck. Rachel and I sidled closer, sheepish, the way people tend to be when they have an inside connection to the center of attention, proud, yet embarrassed.

"Is she very badly bitten?" I asked quietly.

Kath did not take my lead. She spoke for all to hear. "From what I can see, there are no bites. I don't think there ever was a shark."

The disappointment in the crowd was evident. Both Kath and I winced.

"Then what was all the commotion about?" I asked, my voice still low.

Kath shrugged.

The girl's mother moved her hands to her hips. Her voice shook. "You weren't playing wolf again, were you, Annie? You wouldn't put me through —"

Annie shook her head. "No, mommy," she sobbed, and pointed to her stomach.

"What is it, honey?"

"It's still there," she cried, the tears intensifying.

The woman knelt beside her daughter, apprehension rising as she peeked under the swimsuit. The crowd stepped back.

"My god!" she said, covering her mouth. "Annie! Poor Annie."

"What is it?" Kath gulped, leaning lower for a better view.

"What is it?" I echoed, not certain I really wanted to know.

The woman slipped the straps of the swimsuit from her daughter's shoulders and gingerly peeled the top down to the girl's waist.

I turned my head to the side, watching with one eye. I advised Rachel to do the same, but she ignored me, as bold as her mother.

Like most, I was expecting a bloody cavity of shredded flesh, but instead, there on the girl's belly, shimmering innocent and silver in the noonday

sunshine, mouth resting contentedly in her navel, lay a fish. No more than seven or eight inches in length, it seemed barely alive, gills pulsating ever so slowly.

As the realization spread, people began to giggle. Some returned to the water, others to their towels, lunches and tubes of sun-block.

"A bloody fish," groaned one of the lifeguards. "How the heck did it get under there? Never seen anything like that."

"Could be a baby shark, couldn't it?"

"I think it's a herring," a local suggested. The fishing lures in his hat enhanced his credibility.

An elderly lady, beer can trembling in left hand, tried to make Annie feel better: "What a pretty girl you are. And a very good fisherman, too. Have your mother fry that up with a little milk and flour, some butter and lemon juice."

"Didn't know these waters had herrings," said a woman with sunglasses on her head.

"I like herring, especially the tidbits in wine sauce with onions," said somebody else.

But the girl's mother was neither swayed nor impressed. "I don't care what it is," she declared, and swatted the fish with the back of her hand. It glanced off my knee and dropped to the sand at my feet.

I jumped back. "Jesus!" I said, brushing imaginary scales from my leg.

"Hi, Annie." Rachel curled her fingers into a tiny wave. "Want the rest of my celery stick? It's got cheese dip on it."

No one bothered to examine the herring. Except for a hungry gull that glided in from nowhere.

"There's a click in my head, Daddy," Rachel reported at bedtime.

"Again?"

"Uh-huh. But more like a clock this time. Tick, tock, tick, tock."

"Well, Mommy brought you to the doctor and he said it was nothing. Sometimes things like this happen when we get excited. And this has been an exciting day for you — for all of us."

"Especially Annie." Rachel nodded.

I tucked her in, and met Kath on the porch.

"Care for a blackberry cooler?" she asked.

I smiled. "Make it a double."

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When we first started coming to Goose Breakers — six years before, just after Rachel was born — the closest gym was way up in Portland, so I got into the habit of jogging to Cape Beckon and back each morning after sunrise. (Well, to be honest, I walk more than I jog.) Although a gym finally opened in Cheterbunk, summer before last, I felt the fee for tourists was out of line and stuck with the jogging. Besides, who in their right mind would make time for stair-climbers while on vacation? There was also the daily chat and mug of coffee with Paul Blankenship to consider.

Paul was an orthodontist from Buffalo who wrote novels on the side. He had published four, and had given me copies of the last three. Occasionally, he promised to dig out his first for me, but never did, and I made a point of not reminding him. I tried reading each, but after slogging through the early chapters, resorted to skimming and scanning.

An alcoholic stockbroker, obsessed with a schizophrenic tollbooth attendant and former nun, discovers he is the bastard great-grandson of post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin and his life is forever altered.

A Mohawk discus thrower and Olympic hopeful, the one-time foster child of a renegade Amish family, becomes infatuated with a Romanian diving coach who, on page 92 of the 564 page opus, learns she has multiple sclerosis — a crisis which leads to their shared quest to climb Mexico's Popocatepetl and discover the mystic truths that dwell therein.

A Buffalo hematologist abandons his career and family to paint urchins in the streets of Cuzco, Peru, eventually losing his way and his sanity in the alleys of Machu Picchu.

I supposed he was a good writer; the paperbacks were oversized and overpriced, and looked nothing like a Clancy or a Grisham. Of course, I never told him that his style was beyond me and that Clancy and Grisham were, at least, readable.

"I straighten the teeth of people who do not smile and I write books that people do not buy," he once told me.

"They're wonderful stories," I lied.

"But if the artist is unappreciated, is that his failure or his audience's?"

I tended to shrug a lot around Paul.

On the other hand, I enjoyed his company and conversation. I often told him he should be narrating documentaries. I also know he looked forward to

my two-week stay that usually landed in the middle of his six, especially since his wife and daughters had thrown him out. Last vacation, he had brought along their grounds, a pretty young dental assistant with long black hair and lips in a permanent pucker, but she had since left him, too. It was just as well, she was quite a distraction. As Kath had said, "Laurel doesn't wear clothes, she wears invitations."

Every morning, as long as it wasn't raining, I'd catch Paul on my way up the beach, and wave as I trotted by. It was his cue to put on the coffee. By the time I returned, a hot mug would be waiting for me on the patio, usually with a couple of muffins, if he remembered to pick any up. (When his wife was still with him, they would be homemade. Big, dry, unswallowable, brown things that somehow came to life with coffee.) We'd chat till about eight-fifteen, he'd give me a cinnamon candy stick for Rachel, and then I'd head back to the cottage to start breakfast for her and Kath. It was a comforting routine. As I was soon to be reminded, however, routines are easily demolished.

IT WAS THE DAY AFTER the fish-in-Annie's-swimsuit incident.

As I rounded Ripple Rock near the pier at Cape Beckon, slowing from sluggish jog to listless walk, a dark streak of something shot across the path in front of me, a shadow cut loose from an unseen entity. I broke stride, stubbing my toe on a knob of half-buried driftwood, and fell to one knee. Whatever it was landed several feet to my left. I caught my breath, picked myself up, sighed, and hesitantly limped over for a closer look.

Talk about coincidences. It was my second suicidal herring in two days. I'd heard of whales pulling stunts like this, but never fish. I glanced cautiously out to sea, just to make sure no whale was following. I made a mental note to call the Coast Guard. This was something a marine biologist might want to investigate. The thought made perfect sense. Then.

It flopped about in the sand, sucking air through desperate gills. I considered saving its life, tossing it back to the sea, but could not bring myself to touch it. For all I knew, this suicide thing could be contagious, and I might end up throwing *myself* into the sea, or into traffic, or something. So I left the herring to gasp and bake in the dawn's early light.

I was late getting to Paul's, but my coffee was waiting for me as usual on the arm of the old wooden garden chair. The chairs and patio table were all

that remained from the shack that had previously stood on the site. Everything else about the place was new, in a rustic, countryish sort of way.

"I'm here," I shouted up the knoll toward the screen door, assuming Paul was fetching the muffins. The coffee was still hot.

On the arm of the chair, Paul's seat, a fat paperback lay open. It was *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon. I thumbed through it for a bit, lost Paul's place, and hurriedly set it back on the arm, hoping he wouldn't notice until after I was gone. Clearly, another book I would never get into.

This wasn't like Paul. He had kept me waiting only once before, the morning after he'd downed a bucket of bad clams at Mary Salt's Lobster Pound. I had rushed off to the pharmacy in Cheterbunk to get him some Fowler's Strawberry Extract, but they were out of stock, so I brought him a cardboard bucket of white rice from the Great Wall Cafe. "You okay in there?" I called.

The reply was a sickening scream that pierced the base of my spine and drop-kicked my stomach into my mouth. The mug shattered on the patio as I leaped from the chair. I whirled about to face the house, my heart pounding, my throat dry. Something was moving on the ground behind the shrubs at the top of the knoll. I took two steps back. "Paul?" I said hopefully. "Is that you?"

The patio lies roughly a hundred feet from the ocean at the base of the knoll behind Paul's house. (The knoll is a bulldozed bastardization of the dunes Goose Breakers is famous for. It runs the entire length of the new development.) From the back door of the house, pastel paving stones lead to five stone steps cut into the knoll, and these lead down to the patio. At the top edge of the slope, on either side of the steps, a short, bushy hedge runs the width of the house, turning at the perimeter of the property line and running up toward the road.

The scream came again and I started to calm. It was a seagull, scavenging busily behind the shrubs. I smiled foolishly, embarrassed that Paul might have seen my less than rational behavior. *What was keeping him, anyway?*

"Looks like I spilled my coffee," I said. "Better wear your sandals out here, Paul, I broke the mug." *Where was he?*

I started up the steps. The seagull ignored me as I paused at the top, but I could not ignore it. I began to gag. The gull was pecking at a dark ball of mucous, fleshy sinews dangling, the blood of whatever it was still wet. Then I noticed the screen of the door had been pushed in, and through the opening I saw Paul on his back on the kitchen floor.

Bile rose quickly, and I vomited on the *Welcome Neighbor* doormat beneath Paul's heels. Now, I knew what the gull had been eating. Paul's eyes had been plucked crudely from their sockets. His face was a mass of blood and black and blue. Broken teeth defiled his lips and chin. His nose was crushed flat and featureless. Suddenly, what I assumed to be the smell of death overwhelmed me. I staggered back toward the door, tripping through the open portal and onto my behind. It was from here I saw the fish.

It lay several feet beyond Paul's head, in the short hallway that connects the kitchen to the sitting room. And it sure as hell wasn't any damned herring. This was a big fish. Real big.

"I'd say we have ourselves a killer halibut, here," chuckled the investigating officer.

"Could only happen to a tourist," his sidekick smirked.

"Sometimes the ocean gets funny, upchucks every once in awhile. Unfortunately, this time, your buddy was the upchuckee."

It was a freak accident. That's all there was to it. Case closed.

I provided details on Paul's next of kin, but I thought it best to call Abby, his ex, on my own.

She hardly said a word until I'd finished.

"From the looks of it, Abby, he went quickly."

"A fish? You're telling me a fish?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "A real flukey kind of thing."

"Scales of justice, no doubt," she said, with no trace of irony.

"We leave tomorrow," I told Kath. A week remained on the rental, but she did not protest. We were both shaken by Paul's death.

Around midnight, Rachel awoke from a bad dream. She called, "Mommy, Mommy." Both Kath and I rushed to her, but she looked right through me to Kath. "You're not my mommy," she said.

"Of course, I am, honey. It's me, Mommy."

"No," she insisted. "No, you're not."

At best, we slept uneasily, till a bullying wind and an intimidating thunder kept us up for good.

It was a bit past five when the rain began its assault, blasting in torrents down the sides of the house, obliterating the sunrise. The thunder had escalated to bombing raid as Kath ran to Rachel and I rushed from room to room closing windows. It didn't do much good. The wind drove water through the cracks of the frames, soaking the walls and floors as thoroughly as if I had not shut the windows at all. The view from every side was a watery blur, as if the house had been dropped behind a waterfall. The thought of a tidal wave surfaced, but I submerged it quickly. I stayed toward the center of the rooms, fearing the panes would crash in on me.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

Finally, I got back up to Kath. She sat on the edge of Rachel's bed, our daughter in her arms. The ceiling was leaking in several places, somehow missing the bed. "We'd better get downstairs," I said, breath short, words clipped. "I don't know what's going on out there, but it's not good." And, as if to confirm my words, the wind roared hungrily overhead, snapped its jaws down on the roof, and, with a violent cracking, wrenched the covering away. Then it came looking for us — shingles and nails flying. And fish. All kinds of fish. Sloshing and flipping and splashing. I tossed Rachel over my shoulder, Kath grabbed the door, and we dashed into the hall and down the stairs. In soggy pursuit, a river sluiced behind us.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

"The door frames," Kath pointed. "It's safest under the door frames." I'd thought that advice applied only to earthquakes, but I wasn't going to argue.

We squatted in the archway between the kitchen and dining room, and passed the time counting fish plunge down the staircase. They'd flop about for a spell, glance off furniture and walls, attempt to find deeper waters, and then just lie there. For Rachel's sake, the ever-resourceful Kath turned it into a game. "And that's a flounder. An ocean perch. Another flounder. A sea herring. Pollack, I think...."

And that is where we stayed, until the winds relaxed, and the thunder and rain played out, and the water ceased to flow down our stairs. Our count, by the way, had reached forty-four, with flounder slightly ahead of herring in number.

Mindful that the worst might yet be on its way, we emerged warily into a hazy blue that passed for daylight — the eye of a hurricane without the hurricane. Neighbors all along our stretch of beach were doing the same. Most in pajamas. Some in towels and underwear. The solitude surreal. The gawking natural. The humidity stifling.

Ours was the only house to lose a roof. As well, a support beam from the porch had been dislodged, denting the fender of our car. At this stage, all that mattered to me was that the engine revved and the wheels turned. We were getting away from Goose Breakers. Today.

"My god! Will you look at that!" a neighbor cried, and our attention skipped from house to beach. Dismay turned to awe.

Somehow, in the midst of the storm, someone had managed to get down to the beach. And in defiance of wind and rain and logic, this individual had carved a sand sculpture that rimmed the realm of impossibility. No sea serpent or moated castle, here. This was a woman. Ten or twelve or, maybe, fifteen feet high. A magnificent creation. A fragile beauty with sad eyes and a sadder smile. *Strangely familiar eyes. Strangely familiar smile.* Her hair caressed her shoulders and her dress skimmed the buckles of her sandals. She stood with arms outstretched, beckoning, beseeching.

"I want to go to her," said Rachel.

"You stay put," I ordered, reaching for her hand, securing her by the wrist.

"She reminds me of the statue of Jesus that overlooks Rio," Kath whispered.

"It makes no sense," I said. "How could it have survived the storm?"

"I want to go to her," Rachel repeated.

"Her hair." Kath swallowed. "I think her hair is moving."

"It's the wind," I said. "The wind is picking up again."

"No," Kath corrected. "It's more than the wind."

And, as the sand woman disintegrated before us, the grains of her being drawn outward to the sea, I was almost sure she had closed her eyes. Before us, a short dive and a half-dozen breaststrokes from the shore, three massive whirlpools chumed, mutating to whirlwinds as they rose, humming kazoo-like as they climbed. Higher and higher, they spiraled, taking the sand woman with them, penetrating the muddy scud, on course for the sky itself.

"The middle one is so pretty," said Rachel. The words had barely left her lips when lightning flashed within the center vortex, irradiating it from bottom to as high as we could see. As one bolt of lightning waned, another flashed alive, and another, and another, maintaining the towering spectacle of electrified and brilliant blue. "So pretty," Rachel said again. "So pretty. Like Mommy." I'd never heard of Nature pulling a stunt like this. It was the

Fourth of July and New Year's Eve rolled into one. Here was a story we could bore friends with forever.

The whirlwind on the left was the first to collapse, dissipating as it toppled out to sea. The one on the right followed, collapsing parallel to shore, sending onlookers scurrying from their porches as waves rumbled up the dunes and over, perilously close to the homes.

The middle one continued to twirl, one spindle anchored to the ocean floor, one tethered to the sky. The faster it spun, the greater the intensity of the lightning within it. Then it, too, began to sway.

"It's going to fall this way," Kath said. "I know it's going to fall this way." She grabbed Rachel by the hand; they ran onto the beach and toward the dunes that front Comber's Inn. I had nothing to go by except Kath's instinct, but that was good enough for me. I could not, however, bring myself to leave the car behind. *Where the hell were my keys?*

I glanced up to see how far Kath and Rachel had run, but was blinded by the blue...engulfed by the blue...terrified by the blue...deafened by the blue. Sand swept into my eyes and coated my face. I could feel the pressure rising in my ears and I feared the roof of my head was about to blow off. I dropped to my knees and the blue grabbed me by the neck and smashed me face-first into the driveway. It relented momentarily, and I scrambled under the car as the vortex struck.

The house imploded, then exploded, in a watery conflagration.

The backwash spit me out from under the car and dragged me onto the beach. My knees were bloody. My arms were scraped. My face was cut. And fish were fighting for their lives all around me. *So this was the smell of death I had experienced at Paul's house. So death smelled like fish.*

Our cottage was driftwood. I thanked God it was a rental. I wished our car had been the same.

My wallet was gone, but a neighbor found Kath's money pouch at the side of her house sitting atop an abandoned lobster trap.

This was not my idea of a fun vacation.

I had anticipated that I might need to break a window, but it turned out to be easier than that. Although the back door to Paul's cottage had been

boarded up, the nails did not extend into the jamb. It opened without resistance.

I sidestepped the bloodstains on the floor and snatched Paul's car keys from the Bertrand Russell cookie jar in the kitchen. I telephoned Abby to explain, but only her answering machine was home. I told it I'd get the car back as soon as possible.

I deposited our house keys with the rental agent.

"I'll speak to the owners about getting you a refund for your final week," she said.

"I don't care about a refund. But I'll let you know if my insurance doesn't cover the loss."

"Well, I hope you have a good policy. It was, you know, an act of God."

"An act of God? Yah," I said, "I suppose that's what you'd call it."

We managed to avoid the stringer for the Portland paper, and were on the road and headed home before noon. The Audi drove like a dream, but I wisely kept the thought to myself. Why spoil a good thing?

We caught our collective breath over a late lunch at the Pizza Hut in Concord.

As we left the parking lot, I thought I saw flames rising from the restaurant's roof. I readjusted the rear-view mirror and they vanished from sight.

We were no more than ten minutes back on the road when Rachel unbuckled her belt and dove for the steering wheel, the heel of her hand hammering the horn. I swerved into the oncoming lane, but, luckily, traffic was almost non-existent. The tires sprayed gravel as I skidded to a stop on the shoulder, rapping the rear fender off a *Fresh Fruit Ahead* sign.

"What in the hell — ? My God, Rachel!" My hands were stuck to the wheel. "What made you do that? Are you trying to kill us?"

"It's the alarm," she said.

"The what?"

"The alarm."

"You can't do that, honey, when Daddy's driving. We could be very badly hurt."

"No." She shook her head. "We won't be." Then she began to cry. "There's a whistle in my head. A whistle in my head. A whistle in my head."

Kath moved to the back seat to sit with her.

"I think we better get a second opinion on what's going on inside her, Kath. This is really starting to worry me."

"I'll make the appointment first thing, tomorrow," she agreed, moving as close to Rachel as the seat belt would allow.

BILL & WANDA'S, the truck stop at the Hickam exit, is where it finally came together, or fell apart, depending on your point of view. Stopping here was one of our traditions — breakfast on the way to Maine, supper on the return. It was less than ninety minutes from home.

We had missed the dinner rush, so the restaurant was fairly quiet. Two truckers chatted at the counter, polishing off key lime pie and downing bottomless cups of coffee. A couple with a teenage boy argued over menu choices. Two heavy-set older ladies, with yellow hair in ringlets and faces buried in orange pancake, munched on chicken fingers and sipped Bud Lites through straws.

We sat in a booth a couple of rows over from the window. I would have preferred to sit at the window, but the sun was too bright and the dead flies on the sill dulled appetites. I wanted to keep an eye on Paul's Audi. I could get away with the dented fender, claiming it was there when I picked it up, but anything else might not be so easy.

The waitress took our order — grilled cheese for Rachel, taco salads and Buffalo wings for Kath and me — and we settled back to wait.

Rachel played with the jukebox buttons and flipped the selection cards, not asking, but obvious as to what she wanted. I dug three quarters out of my pocket — 5 plays for 75¢, and handed them over. She took them eagerly, punching in numbers at random. A-6. B-3. C-2. A-4. E-9.

"There's singing in my head," Rachel smiled, before a single note came through the speaker.

Kath and I smiled thinly at each other.

Patti Page came up first. She was dancing with her darling to the Tennessee Waltz when a freezer truck barreled into the parking lot, took out a row of gas pumps, bounded airborne off the rear of a flatbed and landed with its 24,000 Eskimo Pies smack atop the Audi.

There was no explosion. Just thick black smoke, rising over the scene. A small gusher danced where the gas pumps had been.

I looked at Kath, she looked at me and, together, we shut our eyes and bit our lower lips. *What next? What next?*

A kid in greasy overalls burst into the restaurant. "Everybody out of here. Ken says it's gonna blow. Get down to the gully out back. Hurry."

I didn't know who Ken was. I still don't. But I sensed he knew what he was talking about.

"This way," our waitress announced, flagging everyone toward the kitchen. "It's faster."

The yellow-haired ladies were the first to go, their chicken fingers and beers in hand. We moved to follow, but Rachel would not budge.

The lights flickered, then died. The buzz of a generator kicked in and emergency lights flashed on, but a moment later it droned to a halt. Outside, the sunset turned to gray, the murkiness flooding through the windows.

"This is no time to play games," I said.

Rachel huddled in the corner of the booth. "I'm listening to the singing," she said.

"There is no singing, Rachel. The power is off. Come," I ordered.

She slid onto the floor and under the booth.

"I'm warning you, Rachel. Either you come out right now or —"

Kath shot me a glance, and I backed off. Kath knelt beside the table. "The man said we have to get out of the restaurant right away, Rachel. It's very dangerous to stay in here. Please come out from under there."

"No," she said. "I'm listening to the singing."

"Cripes!" I slammed the table and dropped to one knee beside Kath. "Enough is enough. You get the hell out from under there or I'm going to give you a spanking you'll never forget." I had never laid a hand on her; I wasn't even sure if she knew what a spanking was.

Rachel shook her head, defiant. She skittered under the adjacent booth and out the other side. She stood, and then we saw that someone was standing beside her.

"Catch her," I shouted. "Please!" Two hands reached down and Rachel was lifted above our sightline.

As we rose, a blue glow filled the restaurant, sublimating the gray. I figured the generator had started up again.

"Thank you," Kath began to say, but the words froze in her throat. She grabbed my arm. My legs began to tremble; I gripped a table for support. My heart raced toward cardiac arrest.

It was the woman from the beach. The woman of sand. Except, this time, she was real, her proportions human and her fragility unearthly radiant. She cradled Rachel in her arms, their faces cheek to cheek. More than anything, it was the resemblance between the two that stunned us, that told us all we dared imagine.

"Simply look the other way," she said. "When you turn around, we will be gone. That is the way it always happens. It is the best way," she said, her voice as serene as her manner.

Kath held her ground. "There is no way I am going to look the other way. If you don't put her down and let her go, I'm screaming for help."

"I am sorry," she said. "But as a sitter, you should never become too attached to the children you care for."

Kath attempted to step forward, but could not advance. "I am not a sitter. I am her mother."

"No," she said, her words hewed in stone, the edges sharp. "*I am her mother.*"

"I bore her."

"Yes. But it was my egg and my seed," the woman said.

"She's mine," Kath cried.

"No. You were only caring for her until she was of age to join me. The people of your world serve us well in this regard. You are among the finest sitters in the galaxy. But the time has come — as the alarms have clearly indicated — and she belongs with her own. She is fit to travel."

"Alarms?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"The storm, the truck crash, the sea creature that killed your friend, among other things," she explained, her regret sincere. "I am particularly sorry about your friend, but we have no control. It comes from within the child. Once the alarm begins to function, it continues until the reunion. It is the only effective method we have to find and reclaim our children. Of course, I thank you both, but can offer you nothing more than that. You had your years with her. Remember them. Think fondly of them. Now it is my turn to enjoy her. Now look the other way," she said again. "When you turn around, we will be gone. That is the way it always happens. It is the best way, believe me."

"Please, Rachel, come to Mommy," Kath pleaded, her tears flowing, me blubbering helplessly beside her.

"I am with Mommy," Rachel answered.

The blue retreated from the room, withdrawing from the ceiling, walls and floor, shrinking aura-like to envelop only Rachel and the woman. Kath reached out. Rachel's fingers curled into a tiny wave.

All that remained was the emptiness.

When they questioned us, we told them everything we knew. "A lady in blue stole our daughter."

Funny how incidents that once seemed insignificant take on a whole new meaning. The first time Rachel saw Disney's *Pinocchio*, she started screeching when the Blue Fairy came on screen. "Mommy! Mommy!" For a long while after that, I teased Kath, calling her the Blue Fairy.

Kath and I hung together for a year or so, but it came to pass that we could no longer face the day or each other.

Sometimes, I see Rachel's picture on the posters of missing children. Recently, computers updated her photo to show how she might appear today. Seems she's looking more and more like her mother.

I guess Paul got to me more than I realized. I've taken to writing stories now. Like this one. And that's pretty much what everybody thinks they are. Stories.

It is certainly safer this way.





PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Manuscript Found in a Pipedream

KNOWLEDGE-
ABLE readers know that one of the most famous unwritten stories in sf is "The Stone Pillow." Part of Robert Heinlein's Future History series, this story was to have told how America fell under the sway of the infamous evangelist, Nehemiah Scudder, the First Prophet, and became a dictatorial Theocracy. Scudder, as Heinlein describes him in an afterword to *Revolt in 2100*, was "a backwoods evangelist who combined some of the features of John Calvin, Savonarola, Judge Rutherford and Huey Long." (The forgotten Judge Rutherford, my encyclopedia informs me, was an early pamphleteer for the Jehovah's Witnesses.) Teaming up with an ex-senator, Scudder and his associates "placed their affairs in the hands of a major advertising agency and were on their way to fame and fortune. Presently, they needed stormtroopers; they revived the Ku Klux Klan in every-

thing but name.... Blood at the polls and blood in the streets, but Scudder won the election. The next election was never held."

So repugnant was this vision to Heinlein that he declared, "I probably never will write the story of Nehemiah Scudder; I dislike him too thoroughly."

It comes as a major surprise then to learn that even a snippet of "The Stone Pillow" does exist. Found recently amongst the files of *Analog* magazine (formerly *As-tounding*, of course, which had published the other portions of the Future History) during their recent move from Lexington Avenue to their new Broadway offices, this fragment is now reprinted for the first time. Although the title page and many others are missing, close textual analysis and typewriter-font matching make it almost *certain* that this work derives from Heinlein's pen, circa 1939. We think this fragment alone will make obvious the terror and disgust felt by

both Heinlein and his editor, John Campbell, which led to the suppression of the work in question.

The Stone Pillow

attributed to

Robert A. Heinlein

" — quiet, Lennie! Here he comes!"

The paired Angels of the Lord flanking the doors to the House of Representatives snapped to attention, butting their ceremonial spears into the thick carpet. At their waists hung both daggers and blasters, ready for either close combat or mass annihilation. But chances were neither weapon would come into play; the First Prophet's victory was too complete. The whole country—that portion that had not heartily endorsed Scudder, but had dared to oppose the man's rampant jingoism, right down to its formerly independent and cantankerous elected representatives—was too cowed and beaten to utter a whimper of protest, much less stage an uprising. That day, if it ever came, still lay far in the future.

"Gee, Zack," whispered the younger of the two Angels, "he's mighty impressive, ain't he?"

Gruffer and more worldly, his companion replied, "Yeah, I guess — if you're at all inclined to fall for that silver-haired, pudgy, sanctimonious type."

Shocked, the young Angel said, "How can you speak of the First Prophet that way? Ain't you scared such talk will get back to him? You'd be in for a heck of a disciplining then. Why, it might even result in a court-martial. Or worse!"

"Yeah," said Zack sardonically. "They might force me to watch that damn loony televisor course he teaches!"

All talk between the comrades ceased then, as Nehemiah Scudder, formerly a poor Georgia farm boy, now ruler of the mightiest nation on the globe, First Prophet, All Holiness Incarnate, came within earshot.

Scudder was a roly-poly figure with a double chin indicative of easy and over-indulgent living. His most striking feature was his massive silver pompadour, much beloved by the frightened and repressed elderly women, gullible lackwits and similarly coiffed arrogant male peers who had helped propel him to power. His expensive suit spoke persuasive volumes, all its accents calculated by the advertising agency of Blankley and Bane, who had groomed the backwoods preacher into the very model of a serpent-tongued snake-oil salesman.

Scudder, trailed by his entourage of lickspittle lackeys and strongarm goons, brushed imperi-

ously past the Angels and entered the chamber where the assembled representatives nervously awaited the arrival of the nation's new leader.

It was the first time Scudder had visited them. And although no one then knew it, it was also to be the last.

Once on the dais and behind the podium (which no longer bore the familiar seal of the United States of America, but instead the sigil of the Theocracy: a mailed fist athwart a cross), Scudder waited for silence to descend. Then he spoke.

"Friends and fellow sinners under the Lord," Scudder unctuously began, "the stern yet loving transformation of our beloved country, demanded by the perilous times in which we live, is now well under way. Irreversible and unstoppable, the remaking of America into a God-fearing fortress of strength is now as solidly established as any free-market contract between seller and buyer. Let me summarize just a few of the new measures we have rammed through in our first hundred days.

"Thousands of orphanages have been opened to hold the children of those security risks whom we have been forced to arrest. In these establishments, these wards of the Theocracy will receive the correct edu-

cation, becoming the first generation properly raised on the principles of Scudderism, ensuring a long and bright future for the Theocracy.

"Two-way, perpetually open televisors have been installed in nearly forty percent of the nation's homes. We estimate one-hundred percent coverage by the end of next year. These televisors allow us to monitor the needs and desires of the people continuously and so effectively that voting is no longer a necessity. Knowing the will of the people intimately, we can respond in their best interests immediately, dealing with every threat to stability.

"All forms of individual and family public assistance have been terminated, freeing up funds for increased armed defense against our numerous enemies internally and abroad. All able-bodied citizens, whatever their personal circumstances, will now be encouraged to become fully self-supporting. Whatever labor cannot find a home in the marketplace will be welcome on the government pressgangs. These parasites and drones who used to ride the government gravy-train will become productive members of society at last, aiding in the building of various Theocratic institutions, such as palaces and churches.

"Likewise, all government as-

sistance to public transportation has been abolished. Travel permits will now be issued upon examination by the proper authorities. Additionally, tax breaks given to publishers, museums and concert halls are a thing of the past. The Board of Censors will now administer these areas in the public interest.

"As I'm sure you will all agree, these measures and the dozens of others of the same nature which we have established have put the country on a self-sustaining course under my firm control. A strong hand which no longer needs the assistance of an antiquated body such as this one I am now addressing. It is therefore my solemn pleasure to announce the dissolution of the House of Representatives. If you'll excuse me now, I have to go address the Senate."

Under a pall of silence, Scudder turned to leave. Suddenly, a figure in the audience shot to his feet. Everyone recognized Representative Francis Barnacle of Massachusetts, birthplace of the First American Revolution.

"You're on mighty chummy terms with the Almighty," Barnacle shouted, "and that lets you lay down the law to us mere mortals! But I say you're just a knothead with a loud voice, an IQ around 90, hair in your ears, dirty underwear, and a lot of ambition. You're too lazy to

be a farmer, too stupid to be an engineer, and too unreliable to be a banker. But brother, can you pray! And now that you've gathered enough other knotheads around you who don't have your vivid imagination and self-assurance, you're no longer plain old Nehemiah Scudder, but the First Prophet!"

Angels rushed to restrain Barnacle, but he proudly shook them off. Everyone waited for Scudder to respond. When he did, his voice was mild.

"I'm glad to see that Mr. Barnacle wishes to be the first among you to volunteer for one of the roadgangs. May he wear his chains lightly. Any others wish to step forward? No, I thought not...."

With that, Scudder made his exit.

Later that same evening, Scudder and his cronies sat in the Oval Office, congratulating themselves and drinking. A timorous knock signaled a visitor. "Come in!" roared Scudder.

A young aide entered, bearing a Western Union telegram. "Prophet, I — I hate to disturb you, but it's about your wife."

Scudder laughed and swilled some raw bourbon. "Ain't she dead yet?"

Some of the Prophet's compatriots seemed inclined to wince, but repressed the unhealthy urge.

"No, sir, I'm afraid not. And the doctors wired to say she's calling for you."

"Well, hell, boy, you don't expect me to leave these here well-deserved celebrations and travel halfway across this goddamn city to see some goddamn weak bitch who can't even kick the bucket without me holding her hand, do you? Besides, now that my Mother has established the order of Sacred Virgins, I don't rightly need ol' Mrs. Scudder anymore, do I?"

"Uh no, Your Holiness, I guess

not...."

"Then why are you still standing there like a frog-faced idiot!" bellowed Scudder.

The aide gulped and turned tail. After he had gone, the room burst out into crude laughter. When the cackling had ceased, Scudder summed up the prevailing sentiment.

"That used-up old nag of mine has her head on a stone pillow now!"

One of the lackeys chimed in. "Just like the rest of the nation, Chief!" 卐

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"Sisterhood of the Skin" is Arinn Dembo's first sale. She attended the Clarion West Writers' Workshop in 1990, and has written some science fiction criticism. She's from Seattle, and has two children.

"I wrote 'Sisterhood of the Skin,'" she writes, "after absorbing a lot of horror stories from people who had worked on fishing boats in Alaska. The life of the merchant seaman is atrociously brutal and dangerous, even in this modern age, and there is little or no legal protection for men and women working in international waters—even less protection than there is for the waters themselves. I suppose I was trying to capture my sense of commercial fishing as a continuous state of violence, not only against Nature but against the finer feelings which make us human."

Sisterhood of the Skin

By Arinn Dembo

JONES CUT A SILKIE OUT OF the net today; I came up from the hold to find him trying to kill it on deck with a length of pipe. The rest of the swing shift stood around him, giving him a wide berth; their eyes were hollow and black in the rain. No one wanted to be too near him. He made a broken, high-pitched sound as he struck, squeals of rage wringing out of him in bursts—as if it were him being beaten.

It looked like a female. It made no sound, ribs already broken over vital organs but nowhere near death—that flesh is too tough, flexible, packed thick onto bones like rock. The breasts were swollen. It may have been nursing a calf, down there somewhere in the black water. The golden pelt was spattered with blood, so red and dark that it seemed almost purple. Its mammalian blood, based on iron but thick as gravy; the veins in those sleek, supple bodies are like drain pipes.

For just a second its eyes caught mine. I drew my gun and shot it, erasing the eyes, the winged nostrils, the lion's mouth, the misery. Its face was too much like a woman's—too much like my own.

Jones looked up at me, frozen in his simian squat with the bloody pipe still in his hand. He was beyond speech. I had an endless moment to hold the targeting beam on the center of his chest and wonder if it wouldn't be best to kill him, drop him over the side and try to cut our losses. His eyes were clear, blue, and utterly vacant — a berserker.

In the end it was simply the fact that I wanted to kill him that decided me against it. I let the barrel of my pistol twitch toward his weapon; he caught the gesture, looked down stupidly at the bent pipe in his hand, and relaxed his grip for long enough to let it slip out of his fingers and fall to the rusting deckplate with a clatter. He lowered his head and wiped at his mouth, like a man wakened from a nightmare; one of the men kicked the pipe away, another touched his shoulder. I holstered the gun. Jones the Elder was back, for what it was worth.

"Let's get this operation back on line before the Captain notices, shall we? You — Gallegos, is it? Get the rest of your crew together and get that thing down to the lab for me. Don't drag it, either. I don't want blood on those stairs." I looked at Jones. What to do with him? He was moving slowly, stiff and numb, to pick up his gear. "Jones, good work. That's a thousand dollar bounty on the silkie, plus the time and a half. You better clock out and spend some time in the hold, or we won't be able to afford the bill we're running up on you." He rubbed the stiff white bristles at the top of his head with his palm and then nodded, once, in my direction. I watched him go below, his arms swinging dead from the shoulder sockets, like a marionette with half its strings cut.

The sea rolled under the bowsprit far below, boiling away from the prow like surf smashing against the base of a cliff. I went to the rail to smoke a naval cigarette, furtively biting the end to light it. They're supposed to be pinched alight with your fingernails, but the sparking fluid they dip the paper in is mildly hallucinogenic, much more potent than stale tobacco. A lot of the men don't bother smoking them at all, just sit around sucking the ends, pleasantly stoned on the spark.

On the horizon I saw a silkie leap. Perhaps it was a male; it's difficult to say yet whether there are such things as silkie males. I've had only two specimens on the table so far, the one I shot today and the other that drowned in our deep net, which must have been a calf. There were hints in the immature physiology which are echoed in the adult; it may be that all the

silkies are basically hermaphroditic. It's only because of their faces and mammaries that they seem female to us. I looked out over the rain-ragged swells and saw it clear the waves completely, a thick golden arc far out over the green-black sea.

It leaped over and over, until it became exhausting to watch. That fabulous strength.

She was too big to fit easily on the operating table. As the men shoved and dragged the great golden corpse this way and that, trying to get it on the slab, I had to think of Wayland Jones — Jones the Younger — or rather, the pitiful remnant which I had examined a few weeks ago; there was nothing left of him but his arm.

I've drawn my pistol twice on this voyage. I had to force Benito "Bunny" Vicarro to shinny out to the end of the bowsprit at gunpoint in order to recover that arm; it was frozen to a steel safety rung, and the fingers had to be pried off with a knife. Vicarro cried through the whole operation. I'm sure he thought it was vengeance for getting the Jones boy killed. Not true: he was the natural choice. The man is as graceful as a gibbon.

Wayland Jones came out on this trip with his father. He'd never been fishing "off the rock" before — that is, off his home planet. I don't remember much about him, sadly. He shared his father's terse, powerful genetic code: thick body, heavy arms, bandy legs, mastiff's jaw. A product of unusually high gravity. He had all of his father's virtues as a seaman and a fisherman, without the temper so far as I could tell. He also had dark, curly hair — a gift from his mother, whoever she may have been.

Hazing is the rule on a first voyage. I'm sure that Jones, Vicarro and Templeton thought nothing of making the poor kid crawl out on the bowsprit to knock off the icicles forming on the gigantic pole — without telling him that it would all melt off in seconds if we sent out a burst transmission; the *Albatross* can generate several gigawatts of power. Jones Jr. gamely hugged the pylon and humped his way slowly out over the sea: a hammer in one hand, finding his grip with the other, while the freezing spindle plunged sickeningly over the waves.

I was in the foc's'le tower, looking over our satellite photographs of the area, trying to locate the next school of "fish" in the feeding grounds. I saw Jones Jr. when I happened to look out the window; he had already gone quite

a distance from the main body of the ship. He was hugging the transmitter and flailing at the underside with a mallet.

I went to the com to tell him to get the hell off before he got himself killed. The waters of this planet are full of fluorocarbons; they freeze at an extremely low temperature, and even in full gear a man is not likely to survive for more than five minutes overboard—also, we were making at least thirty knots, and he might very well have been sucked into the static envelope and crushed before we could pull him out of the drink.

He seemed to see something in the sea beneath him. He lost a toe grip and he was suddenly hanging by one hand from the bowsprit, dangling over the swirling water; on deck his father and shipmates jumped up and down in silent glee—a tribe of victorious chimpanzees dressed in men's clothes. From the foc's'le I saw what they could not: the pale shape, skimming fast just under the translucent green surface—I reached for the controls of the forward ice cannon, but I was much too slow.

The silkie reared from the water like a golden-bronze geyser. In the flood lights the men on deck saw it at last, all four meters of the enormous flexing body completely clear of the chop, dancing backward on its tail...reaching for young Jones with long, slender flippers open like arms. The monitors did not catch his shriek of terror when its body struck him, twirling him around on the pivot of his wrist like a pig squealing over the slaughtering trough; in the tapes you only see his open mouth, gaping wide for a soundless scream.

It caught him, one limb over his shoulder and the other around his chest—it hugged him like a girl leaping onto her lover's back, wanting him to carry her—and sank its muzzle into the muscle layered over his collar bone, tusks shearing through tendons, shattering bones. For a moment, his arm heroically supported them both. The silkie's weight was so tremendous that the arm ripped free at the shoulder before his grip could weaken enough to drop him into the sea.

The elder Jones lunged over and over against the men restraining him, howling, clawing at them; he would have gone overboard if they had lost hold of him. Several cubic centimeters of thorazine were required before he could be quieted. It was not the best drug for the purpose, but it was handy in the psych cabinet and I had no time for subtleties; it took six men just to throw him down the stairs into the lab.

I would have liked to try and trace the silkie: not possible. Jones

distracted me for a few crucial minutes, and this ocean smothers our maximum sonar output within three hundred meters of the ship — our loudest shout is lost in the roar of the seismic tide. The Captain belayed my order to submerge the *Albatross* and search. The silkie took her prey unseen and unhindered down into the dark.

I FINISHED MY autopsy of the creature sometime during the first shift this morning, rinsed off my isolation gear under a spray of green antiseptic in the lab and then hiked wearily up the narrow iron staircase to my quarters.

The suit had to be stripped off piece by piece and dropped into the autoclave, and my skin scrubbed until my body stings all over and I'm half-boiled — still, I feel a fever coming on; my teeth are already starting to chatter with anaphylactic chills; there must be elements in that thick blood which can penetrate my skin. The passage of my throat is narrowing. Feels as if the air is thickening somehow, becoming more difficult to breathe. My body is attacking itself — and good riddance.

I never have wanted this body. I've applied a dozen times for improvements, been denied every time — even the simplest things, like full spectrum eyes. Some of the crew have them. Or a simple immune enhancement; if I had one I wouldn't be suffering like this now. My False Counselor always relays the same message:

"We've found that implants are inadvisable in cases like yours, Ms. Tso. These improvements are poorly suited to a personality motivated by feelings of inadequacy. I can't recommend the procedure, based on your record." One doesn't have the luxury of hating that placid, smoothly animated face; the computer is perfect, it cannot err. The Counselor program is so realistic that it took me six months to realize that I wasn't actually seeing a human therapist — a good one. It provided all the encouraging noises and probing questions I'd come to expect from a psychologist. "If you need to talk, you know I'm always available."

The hate belongs at home. If you have to hate anything, hate this weak, flabby, fallible shell, hate the personal failings that have trapped you inside it.

At any rate, I can't sleep with my breath being squeezed away; might as well record my impressions of the silkie for future reflection.

This was apparently the one that got Jones. I found a naval wristwatch

and three old copper coins on a chain — a good luck charm! — in its digestive tract. These were in one of several secondary stomachs which surround the much larger primary digestive cavity. I can't determine the purpose for these subsidiary organs; at first I thought I might have stumbled on a second reproductive system—those nine egg-plant shaped stomachs were beribboned with blood vessels and glands, much more suggestive of a uterus than any kind of gastric organ. The presence of Jones' personal affects seems to suggest that they serve to store indigestible items until they can be expelled. I have recovered stones from two of the other stomachs; these are coated with a thick, nacreous fluid. Do the silkies form pearls in order to protect the delicate alimentary canal?

The intestines are fascinating and also very unusual; the walls are covered with filaments, which seem to serve a double purpose: they absorb nutrients from digested food (an ungodly amount of "fish" in the silkie's gut, in various stages of digestion; they must feed several hours a day) and they also seem to "feel" the food, palpate it as it passes through the digestive tract. The filaments are loaded with nervous tissue, and the area is incredibly blood rich and sensitive. (NOTE: An ingestible poison may be the best way to deal with these animals, should they become a serious problem.) The spinal cord is only inches away from the gut; the nerve fibers are dense in the area, a thick springy webbing which I was not able to examine in fine detail.

The error I made in destroying its skull when I killed it may have been a blessing in the end. If there had been a brain intact, I might have spent all my available time examining it, trying to determine its potential intelligence — I might not have gotten to the rest of the body at all. The Company xenobiologists would have plumbed the secrets of its carcass in a lab many light years from here.

I'll send a full report to the Captain, along with my recommendations: I don't think the elder Jones needs to be informed of the silkie's payload. The man seems to be teetering dangerously; I'd hate to think that the revelation would destabilize him further. I'd like to keep him functioning for another three weeks, until we can bring the load in. It's the biggest haul on this circuit, our first virgin ocean. Even after three hundred years (subjective time) to restock themselves, the fish parks can't yield the bounty that we're taking now; four cubic miles of fish in a net, two nets full to brimming every week.... A world never yields its maidenhead twice.

* * *

Woke up after the first shift when my fever broke. Still weak. I can't face the Captain; I've logged my report.

I dreamed of my father. I saw his face, the two paradoxical halves of it, I was sitting on his lap, very small — small enough again to touch his hard cheek, to polish his glowing golden eye, and feel its heat through a chamois cloth. His flesh eye never seemed as human or real as the other; it was nothing but a sad brown relic. Just so, his flesh hand never seemed as gentle or skilled as the cybematic one.

My mother was in the dream as well.

My father came to us in the hogan. He walked in without speaking and sat heavily at the table; the chair croaked under him like an old woman carrying a load of firewood. He opened his battered pectoral plate — his chest split open like a pinata. Candy showered onto the tabletop. He looked down on me, his daughter, and smiled.

Mother stood by the stove, wrapped in blankets and ropes of silver. She was a wealthy woman who married outside her own tribe; my father was a half-breed Lakota before he became a god of destruction. She poured out a bowl of blue corn mush and set it down in front of him, her lips pressed tight. He looked down at the bowl and suddenly went still, shut off like an automaton.

It was too much for her. She went to the corner and bent to pick up his portable generator, because he didn't have a saddle and she had to throw something out the door; I found out later that this is what the women on the reservation do to declare a divorce. He slept, sitting upright at the table with his head bent slightly, as if he were studying his scorched armor. His chest did not move as he breathed.

She dragged the machine to the door, bent nearly double by its weight, while I sat eating my candies two at a time, heedless of the flavors mishmashed in my mouth...afraid she would take them away from me. My mother grunted, freeing one hand to open the screen door. She threw the generator out into the red dusty yard. It exploded in a shower of sparks as it hit the ground, and my father snapped upright in his chair, his movement so swift and well-oiled that it could never be mistaken for human.

I don't think he even recognized her. She had cut off his power when he was weak and exhausted; she was a threat. He fired two scissoring beams

which plunged into her belly and chest, and she burst into a hot, stinging cloud of superheated red steam. Her four limbs were lost in four directions, and I lay on the kitchen floor, burned and crying — her blood was so hot.

He had great difficulty remembering sometimes who the enemy was. I woke one night a few years later to find his golden eye trained on me, sights open. I begged him not to shoot, calling him Poppy the way I did when I was four; he went back to bed, shaking his head slowly from side to side. It took weeks sometimes before the Company repaired the damage to his brain.

They separated us after my "incident." Better for both of us, they said.

Things on deck look good. I've brought miso to the foc's'le and the mid shift reports a school in the nets. There are men on the winches, easing the deep net into the hold to let the seawater drain. I've assigned a few dozen slimers to a watch on deck and on the sonar; I don't want to lose any more chances at a silkie. The women seem grateful for a break from cleaning fish. The machinery can handle it for a few hours; the humans are really only there to maintain standards of quality.

Fascinating creatures, these silkies — they must be rare, or the probes would have spotted them along with our prey. They wouldn't have sent us here if there were any visible Samoans. Bad policy.

This planet is sometimes very beautiful. If only there were any land, someone would colonize it; the waters are loaded with life. Inuit or Norwegian settlers would do well. I can imagine their hide boats on the water, slipping easily over these beds of vegetation where the *Albatross* cannot venture — curachs and kayaks following that trail of twisting green fire which dances on the skin of the sea. They would hunt the silkie as they hunted the orca, with bone-tipped spears.

Lost another man. Still not sure how. Gunther Jones is being held accountable at the moment.

Sometime during first shift today, the crew went in to gas the drained catch in the hold. Simple enough procedure; we've done it a dozen times. The fish are too strong to be gutted live; they have teeth sharp enough and jaws strong enough to snap off a length of two-inch titanium pipe. However, they are susceptible to ethylene gas, which is generally harmless to the men, once it disperses; it asphyxiates the fish within minutes and dissipates quickly

enough that they can be processed and packed without danger of spoilage. The crew goes through the job in about twenty minutes, firing their gas hoses into the net.

They claim that this time, the fish fired back.

I've watched the tapes, I attended the interrogations...the officers scoured the hold with everything but an electron microscope. There was no weapon. No perpetrator. No fish, either, the net was unmoored in the fracas and dropped back into the ocean. Half a million dollars rained back into the soup and swam as fast as fins could carry them to the deepest, blackest crevasse in the sea. It reflects on us, not the cyborg officers; despite their general disinterest in shipboard affairs, the Company holds them to be infallible.

The tapes, as usual, are useless. Nothing but gouts of red light ripping through the sudden torrent of fish, ethylene canisters howling out their contents without hands to control the flow, men screaming, James Freedman burning. It was obviously a nasty little T-rod that did the job, the sort of laser mining torch that sailors can buy in any port in the system — nastier than most. I've got a man laid out in my lab who's missing most of the left side of his body. Your average black market laser can't generate that kind of power.

It doesn't matter. Jones has gone insane. He must have dropped his weapon into the water after firing it at Freedman — or perhaps, much less likely, after firing at a man standing on the other side of the hold. The walls are polished steel; it's not strictly impossible that they could have reflected the energy, some kind of ricochet effect. Jones was standing one man over from Freedman at the time. This is the current consensus: the beams coming out of the net would be just an illusion caused by darkness, gas, confusion.

No sense can be extracted from Jones at all. After the last frenzied assertion that someone in the net was shooting at him, I put him down. His constitution is such that no tranquilizer will hold for long; it may be more economical to put him back into suspension for the duration of the trip. Of course, the extra time will partially drain his tank, but it's more than possible to transfer him to his son's berth for the journey home. Or Freedman's, for that matter.

We're behind, thanks to this appalling accident. We'll have to bring in another load before we can climb the well and get off this spinning ball of slush, and then take the short way home in order to make it in on schedule.

The cargo is already promised to half a dozen hungry worlds. If we don't deliver, I can say goodbye to any chance of leaving this kind of duty; for that matter, I might pull worse. I'm the sci-med on this scow, for what it's worth — an officer, despite the fact that I'm all meat and no metal.

I'll take the obligatory look at Freedman, although I'm sure there isn't anything else to find. I'm getting very tired.



MAN CROSSED himself before obeying my orders. Such a familiar gesture that I stood gaping at him for a few seconds, while he eyed me sidelong, his eyes long, dark, dubious. The gesture was so pervasive throughout my childhood and youth that seeing it ripped me out of time: Spanish women crossing themselves at my father and me as we ate ice cream in front of the Palace of the Governors. For a moment, I felt what my father must have felt; contempt, indifference, shock. Shame under it all, the nagging shame of one who has surpassed the species in some grotesque way.

There aren't enough places to lay out cadavers in this scabby little kitchenette/laboratory. The silkie occupies the operating table, Freedman's body I've balanced on the open counter by the sink, I only need the one side anyway. Jones is still in the tank, and there shouldn't be any need to lay him out anywhere, if he'll just cooperate. The tank is unwieldy, blocks the door to the lab, who cares? A crowded little den of science.

Damned glad I managed to get a bead on this silkie when she cleared the water. Of course, I was only being professional; I didn't think I'd hit her, but I knew I wouldn't get another shot at her. That's the second time I've been lucky. It's statistically unrealistic to expect the luck I'll need to get away with this — these investigations of mine are pure indulgence. I should be carving up fish, not hunting mermaids.

She doesn't look much like a silkie now. The flippers have become articulated into five digits, one of which looks distinctly opposable. Coincidence? Impossible. The bones are much more plastic than previously; they actually bend in the middle like green wood. This, in contrast to the first adult Jones brought in; she had bones like granite. The skull is also softened, unknitted; it has to be. *The thing was growing a new face.* I can't imagine how it was happening, but I intend to find out.

I questioned Jones before he was fully awakened from his deep sleep, still lying half-buried in the shining shock gel of the suspension tank. He stirred feebly as I wiped the cold jelly from his face and peeled away the mask so that he could pull his own oxygen.

"Hello, Gunther. Can you hear me?"

Jones blinked his eyes, slowly and rhythmically. It took me a moment to realize that there must be a film of the jelly coating his corneas; perfectly clear, but it would distort his vision. He opened his mouth, sticky threads stretching between his parted lips, and drew in a rattling breath. I had to lean close to catch his word.

"Dead," he said.

I drew away. He did look dead; worse, hideously resurrected. It was not pleasant to be reminded.

"Am I dead."

His barrel chest seemed to buckle; his shoulders folded together and he sank deeper into the tank. I caught his chin and held his face out of the glistening ooze, not wanting him to drown.

"You're not dead, Gunther." It took some doing, but I kept my grip on his jaw and pulled him further from the tank without actually having to immerse my hands. The suspension medium is perfectly inert and harmless, but very unpleasant to the touch when chilled.

His eyes rolled up in their sockets, leaving nothing but the sickly blue-white sclera staring out of the parted lids, and he began to speak poetry. I believe the first word was a man's name: Norm, or perhaps Norms. The language was old, some guttural, wet Scandinavian tongue.

Jones opened his eyes again, he seemed to see me quite clearly, suddenly, although it was obvious he had not awakened from his psychotic nightmare. "Oh, he's dead, all right. I've seen you. You and your metal men. Dragon's teeth in the water." His lips pulled back from his teeth and he began a mnemonic exercise, one of the simplest, which fishermen are often taught to help control their panic responses when they lie in the suspension tank, waiting to lose consciousness. It was the one which begins:

*"I rowed and rowed until I knowed there wasn't no more to row,
For I'd come to the place where the water and waves turn into the ice and
snow..."*

* * *

"Gunther, did you see Wayland in the net?"

He looked at me, cut off in mid-verse. His mouth moved very slowly into the most malicious smile I have ever seen.

"Was he there, Gunther? Did you see him?"

"— *It was all very nice in the mountains of ice...*"

He continued to recite it until I turned down the temperature of the suspension and pulled the mask back over his stiffening face. It's useless to try to extract information from the man. His mind is broken and I do not have the professional skills or equipment to mend it.

It's a shame, really. I wanted to know whether he had seen his son bite off James Freedman's arm.

Apparently my assumption about the last silkie was incorrect. This one was carrying many small bones in her gastric pouches, all of them recognizably human: a few carpal bones, metacarpi, and the terminal digits of a human hand. There almost seem to be too many of them, even given my previous hypothesis that a silkie in the net succeeded in biting off Freedman's arm when he was killed. The bones were coated in a shimmering calcium secretion, which is very similar in nature to a terrestrial mollusk's — spectrographic analysis reveals nothing more unusual than a few skeins of rare mineral, typical of the sediments we dredged from the bottom. It looks very much like mother-of-pearl, although the dominant colors seem to be yellow and red. There must be infinite variation from silkie to silkie.

I could spend days dissecting one of these ladies, but there were important matters at hand. I unceremoniously ripped apart her head, examining the contents with my microscopes and spectrometer; eventually the tissues were nothing but a blurry, garish soup which I stirred with black pipettes, and I forgot from moment to moment what it was I had been looking for.

The muscles are blood-rich and full of organic compounds, aldehydes, ketones and lactic acid. The silkie must have been using them to fuel its transformation. Opening the skin was remarkably easy; she had lost many layers of dense subcutaneous fat, which made her pelt hang like a loose robe. I had to gather up a fistful of it and pull it almost half a meter away from the solid flesh beneath to make a neat incision.

I cut the savage golden features of the silkie from the tightly wound tendons and pulleys which bound her skull; the face of Wayland Jones was beneath it. The likeness to a human was so startling that the scalpel dropped from my hand and I had to turn away for several moments, holding my own face in my hands — as if I had suddenly thrown back a coffin lid, squatting in the bottom of a rudely opened grave, and found that the occupant was my own brother.

Only the huge, dark eyes had not changed, all pupil but for a rim of muddy brown-black. The orbital ridge was so flexible that I could depress it with my finger, and the upward curve of the cranium was no longer so sleek and dynamically sloped as it must have been before; the curving forehead suggested a more developed cerebral cortex, and the bone of the pate was wobbly, almost cartilaginous. I found the new neural growths forming over the old, folded tight just above the structure which is so like a mammalian limbic system. They looked like buds, densely wrinkled and ready to spread a profusion of meninges like the petals of a mum.



ALLEGOS FINALLY distracted me from my investigation some time during my fourth consecutive shift in the lab. I did not hear him come in.

"Madre de Dios," he said.

I looked up from the roaring centrifuge and into his wide, staring eyes. I watched, detached, as his face crumpled from shock and disbelieving horror to intense dismay, grief, fear — and a narrow-eyed, shifting look of guilt.

"Way?" he asked, pointing with a finger which he held close to his own chest, as if afraid the corpse would snap at it.

I stared at him, unable to understand him, for what seemed like several minutes. He offered nothing more, only stood looking at me, obviously waiting for an answer, while the gears in my brain ground slowly, trying to process that one enigmatic syllable. A silent, glazed eternity, two faces as blank as bowls of milk locked in a contest of imbecility. At last I blinked.

"Way...land Jones? No..." I shook my head like a dog, trying to clear the feeling of tiny insects crawling and buzzing in my ears. "No, of course not. Look at the body. It's not Jones — a silkie."

Gallegos crossed himself with one hand and used the other to yank a tarp over the glistening, peeled face of his shipmate. His lips pulled back in a

grimace. "It needs to be covered. *A la Verga*...It needs to be *buried*."

Sharp, naked fear washed over my skin. He was right, of course — in a manner of speaking. Gallegos was willing to believe that I'd removed this head from the silkie's stomach, but anyone could have entered the lab during my autopsies and seen the thing — the men are coming in constantly with cuts, colds, fevers; in my delirium, the reaction that they would have to this spectacle had never entered my mind. I couldn't let it be seen.

I looked up at Gallegos and let him read my face — the man is quite literate in the language of expression and gesture, for all he signs his name with a leering devil glyph. He looked away, tense and awkward.

"I'll be needing a few men from your crew, sailor. Send them down in an hour." I looked down at the corpse. "I'll be finished by then."

"Aye." He turned and left, rubbing the back of his neck fiercely with one hand as I started up the bone saw.

I had an extremely strong allergic reaction to the silkie's blood; my fever has broken now, but I've been burning for the past several hours. Had strange dreams.

I was holding a tremendous bowl in my arms, filled to the brim with pearls — pearls as big as a naked skull lay half-buried in seed pearls no bigger than drops of honey. A brown woman stood running one languid hand through the bowl, letting the glowing white sand trickle through her long, slender fingers.

She hefted the biggest pearl in two hands and dropped it into a goblet of wine. The cup seemed small, but it grew as big as a vat to receive the pearl. Thick, dark red slopped over the sides and onto her dress; I smelled hot iron and salt. I dropped my bowl; pearls spilled over my bare feet, and the ground split open; water gushed from the floor, achingly cold. She offered me the edge of her goblet, which she was somehow still able to hold; her hand was gigantic, golden.

"Drink, Beloved," she said, "and you will be transformed." I looked down into the cup, and everything was obliterated but the red reflection of my own face. The red fluid was not wine. It had never been wine. It was silkie's blood, red-violet silkie's blood, with threads of the great pearl in it. A cloud of pale pink boiled up from the bottom of her grail, like milk in a cup of tea. When I wouldn't drink she raised it to her own lips and gulped it down. Blood

ran down from the corners of her mouth as she lifted her head.

She put a hand behind my neck and drew me in for a kiss; as our lips met she pushed smaller pearls out of her mouth with her tongue, forcing them into mine.

I swallowed them.

I had other dreams, some even more confusing, some more painful. I dreamed of my "incident" again — it happens often enough when I'm in good health, much more so when I'm sick or over-tired. I've learned how to wake myself up instantly if the dream begins, hauling myself out by the scruff of the neck the moment I see the signs — that light buzzing above the bathroom mirror, my own trembling rust-brown hands in front of my face. This time, I couldn't free myself; I was too weak to achieve true consciousness, and could only lie there, paralyzed, while I watched it all again.

It was the final dose of mnemonic booster that did it, combined with the stimulants I had taken on my third morning without sleep, I was trying to study for my mid-term exams in quantum mechanics. I saw metallic flashes in the corners of my eyes; I became convinced that my eye sockets were made of metal. If I could only peel off this layer of covering flesh, the rubber mask of brown woman-face, I would find my true face beneath it, gleaming; I could recover my birthright, clean away the blood and polish my own eye with a chamois cloth.

The bathroom, the white basin, the razors my Polynesian roommate used to maintain ritual scars on her arms and thighs. I picked one up, holding the little ceramic wafer awkwardly between my fingers, and made an incision at the hairline.

I watched this for the hundredth time, my own hands working to peel away my brow. In reality there was nothing but blood beneath my skin — I was still red, red again, an Indian girl down to the marrow of my bones. In my dream, I pulled it all away easily, staring at the steely beauty beneath, my jaw elegantly hinged and socketed. I was delighted, and yet somehow I kept pulling at myself, and the steel came away in pieces, like the peel of a strange metal fruit.

Undemeath it all was a silkie's face. She opened her lion's mouth, her soft brown eyes shining. The lips pulled back to reveal her black tusks and purplish gums; she was smiling at me.

"Mother," I said, and at last pulled free of the dream. The Captain's face

hovered above mine, gleaming like a steel moon. I looked up into the silver eyes of his hologram, and made some effort to compose my own features.

"Report to the bridge in one hour."

The officers' quarters are much larger than those assigned to human crew. There are small stairs which lead down onto an audience platform; a chair had been placed on the platform for me, facing the eight central screens.

"Mister Tso, please sit." The Captain and his staff hung in the rungs and struts all around me, each of them bigger than my cabin. Steam rose from the dripping, trembling hulk of the First Mate — he squatted below me on a dais, all sixteen legs splayed out to dry.

"I would prefer to stand, sir." Gallegos had betrayed me to them, surely; I was prepared for discipline.

"Mister Guon has made several sweeps outside the ship since you submitted your last report on the native predators. He discovered a group of them at the furthest edge of his patrol and recorded their behavior from a distance. We cannot classify the footage. Respectfully request your opinion."

I turned away from them and sat, fighting to control the sudden weakness of relief which swept my body. "It would be my pleasure, sir. Please run at reduced speed."

The curving screen shimmered into a huge curtain of sensuous blue-green, so filled with light that the film could not have been shot more than twenty meters from the surface. Silkies materialized in the softly glowing water, arching their backs. Even at full speed they would have been swimming slowly, gently looping over and over in the water. They swam together, brushing flippers and flukes. I didn't realize until they separated that one of them was partially humaniform — the flippers bent at an unnatural angle when she reached for the others.

I froze. "One of them seems to be injured," I said. My chest was tight, constricted — I could hardly breathe. It was ghastly to have to lie to them; but I was suddenly certain of what I was about to see, and the need to protect the silkies was uncontrollable. Tears filled my eyes; I've never been in such conflict before. "Perhaps the others are providing aid or comfort."

"Samoan behavior," the Captain said.

"It would be, yes. But this is certainly not conclusive."

"Continue watching."

Other silkies were dimly visible beyond them, pale and dark circling together in the blue gloom. The group separated and swam one after the other, spiraling down into deeper water. The humaniform silkie rolled over and hung nose down in the water, while the others nuzzled at her flukes and the curve of her anterior surface.

"We found these gestures curious."

I knew what was coming; they swam past her one by one and kissed her, rooting in her muzzle for the pearls. I took a deep breath, turned to the council of titans behind me, and lied again — hoping they would mistake the changes in my vital signs as stress and amazement. "These patterns are similar to others I've studied. A high probability of sentience. They must be Samoans, and we've already murdered three of them — God only knows how many will starve." I closed my eyes, shutting out the gigantic screen and its circling forum. "The scoop will have to be aborted."

The Captain and his staff sat in silent communion, exchanging frequencies beyond my hearing. At last he spoke: "I concur. We will climb the well at 0-eight hundred hours. Please prepare the crew for flight. All scoop operations will be shut down immediately."

I had very little trouble making my escape.

I loaded Jones myself into a new berth for the trip home. The crew was more than willing to hit the tanks; it was the work of two hours to prepare them for the long sojourn in shock jelly and double check their life support systems. There are only fifty-three humans aboard the *Albatross*, most of them second or third generation fishermen. Getting into a suspension tank is as easy as pulling a blanket over themselves.

I made my own preparations at dawn. I unbolted one of the portside ice cannons and loaded it onto Launch Sixty-three, *The Red Shoes*, along with my slides, papers and gear. The boat is designed for sampling sea life in a variety of conditions; the generator will continue providing power and heat long after I'm dead of old age. It will still be running when the next ship comes, if it comes — three hundred years from now, or a thousand.

The timing of the drop was delicate. I couldn't give the Captain any time to abort the launch and retrieve me, so I had to eject during the actual lift-off — wear and tear on the drive mechanism, waste of fuel is worth more than the launch and any ten of the cyborg officers, much less a human one — but

I also had to be free of the *Albatross* and the heavy seas she would cause when she cleared the water. *The Red Shoes* has her own static envelope, but nothing would prevent my body being pulped if she tumbled end over end in a tidal wave.

In the end I jettisoned the boat at about t-minus three minutes and opened up the engines full bore for ninety seconds, skimming and leaping through the high chop at about three hundred km/hour. I submerged to fifty meters and gunned the rotors to fight the turbulence; it was milder than expected. The *Albatross* lifted off on time. My little boat shivered in her inertial bubble and wafted through the sea, trembling under the impact of the violent tides.

To you, the someday reader of this journal, to you I offer this explanation of my acts:

All of my life I have been in exile in my own body, forced to live in a stranger's house. Begging, pleading, struggling availed me nothing; I remained a nubbin of helpless flesh surrounded by machines — an insect scurrying among metal giants. To thrive I needed a titanium shell to cover my nakedness; this was not allowed — if anything, because I wanted it too badly.

The silkies are not so judgmental. My hands still feel strangely soft, I put on gloves last night to counter the effects of the silkie's blood on my own physiology. Without the catalytic elements in the pearl as a substrate to carry an appropriate DNA pattern, my own body doesn't know what to do with itself. My carpal bones have softened somewhat in readiness for change — they may firm again by the time I've determined how difficult it will be to achieve my transformation.

The pearls are the primary form of communication among silkies. If they had a song, it couldn't be heard for long distances, and their numbers are small. They developed a language which they could swallow and pass along, a language which prevents them from being out-adapted by any other organism; any feature which gives an advantage can be absorbed. The story of man's advent is spreading, illustrated among them by blossoming brains and branching flippers.

They seem quite capable of using weapons, given the digits to manipulate them, Freedman was almost certainly shot by the same silkie which ate Jones. She must have been caught in the net with the fish — armed with


Jones's intellect, Jones's opposable thumb, Jones's weapon — a formidable opponent. Their bodies are like bio-genetic factories; whatever they can swallow, they can become. The DNA sampling kit I have onboard should be quite interesting to them.

A pod of silkies approached the boat today. I went out on deck to face them. I've killed and dissected them with my own hands, and I knew perfectly well how serious a threat to my personal safety they could be — but my reincarnation can never succeed without them, and I think they know what I'm trying to do. They dove and leaped all around *The Red Shoes* for over an hour, caressing the hull and peering through the observation ports. At last one of them surged up on the starboard side and caught the rail in her gigantic hands; the ship listed heavily to one side until the envelope was able to compensate for her tremendous weight. She threw one elbow — an articulated elbow! — over the icy rail and held out the other hand to me; her outstretched fingers were easily long and thick enough to wrap around my waist. In the soft, purplish palm there was a pearl.

Among my own people I was nothing, trapped on the receding shore of evolution. Here, I am the matriarch of a new race. There are always silkies alongside my ship, listening to my voice, to the hum of my engine; they seem to come and go in shifts. I think they've been driving fish into my net. Sometimes they trade pearls with me; if I use the saw, I can easily cut the pearls in half, insert a slip of biomass and return it. I've seen the thickening of a larynx here and there; in my dreams, I hear them singing...and although the sound is strange, I know that every voice is my own.

The day will come when I am able to slide naked into the sea, and swim among my new people as one of their number. I will shed this body and grow strong, golden, a ring of rippling muscle and bones like rock.

They will be prepared when humans come to fish these waters again — men will not find them helpless to defend the schools which feed them, the precious pearls of transformation for which *Homo sapiens* would gladly slaughter them. I give them what they need. When tales of me are passed from mouth to mouth, they will call me The Changing Woman. When men and machines are dragged screaming down into the depths, it will be in my name.

I will make them ready, my sisters, my children, my people. Meet us as equals, stranger — or do not venture into the sea. 



A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

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WHILE science fiction often depicted computers, few foresaw the coming of the linked personal computer, and all its manifestations.

An exception was Fred Pohl's *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, a 1966 novel. Though its primary focus was the then-hot innovation of cryonics, its hero used a personal, portable computer to wire himself into the vastly information-dense future world.

Now, a scant thirty years later, Pohl's devices seem quite plausible—indeed, just over the technological horizon. For now our view of the future is dominated by the view that Data Rules All.

This, too, shall pass. For now, the Net has snared us. Cast outward by the culture of computer nerds to ensnare and transform the globe, it is the current hot metaphor for fast

change and broader horizons and infodeluge.

Alas, it comes with its own hot-eyed prophets, grimly sure they are on the cutting edge. John Perry Barlow, much-interviewed savant of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, believes that "We are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire."

Gee whiz.

Revolutionary rhetoric, aside from making you automatically hide your wallet, should alert us to our past. What's being overthrown? Has something like the Net appeared before?

Arguably, yes. Around 1930 a small new phenomenon arose in Depression-ridden America, spawned out of the letter columns in science fiction magazines: fandom.

Though today the term means any gathering of enthusiasts, fandom evolved in the science fiction com-

munity. Strikingly, it anticipated much of Net culture. Its history can suggest how the Net will evolve, often recapitulating earlier experience.

Fandom grew first through individual correspondence. It was cheap and quick, continent-wide contact for a penny stamp.

Just as with email, sometimes science fiction fans sent continuous chains of letters, involving N letter-writers, called WONWs for Wide Open N-Ways.

Then came fanzines. Often odd and eccentric, sometimes devoted solely to news or club functions, these circulated nationally and flourished, growing into the several hundreds of titles.

As the number of 'zines grew, an anarchic sociology flourished. Vile-mouthed, aggressive fans were termed fuggheads, an obvious pun, much like the "flamers" of today.

(Technically, fugg should be a true word to make up a pun. There is the Brit "fug" — a bad smell, as in a crowded room; rather apt here, actually — but okay, then "fugghead" is actually an "orthographic disguise," as fellow fan friend Mose Feder pointed out to me. This is precisely the sort of obscure note fans, and Networkks alike, love.)

As cross-talk grew in the early 1940s, to bring order fans formed

APAs — Amateur Press Associations of limited (and later, invitational) membership. They didn't invent the idea, merely transformed it.

The APAs were much like today's Net newsgroups and listservs, and user groups (which are practical forums, mostly). All act as orderly mailing circles. The first sf APA, *Fantasy APA*, was founded by Donald Wollheim, who went on to become a central figure in the genre's editorial evolution. He wanted to devise a mechanism for everyone to get the primary fanzines of the day.

In the 1940s general fandom devised the "genzine" or general fanzine, which combined features and columns of broad interest. Instead of imitation professional magazines ("prozines" of fiction, science features, reviews, letters), fandom broadened into myriad individual, idiosyncratic mimeographed expressions.

Genzines narrowed the strategy of the mainstream's broadly based, mass-produced magazines, using an insider's voice and attitude, with each editor's special approach.

Fandom evolved through this stage in the 1940s, then beyond, ever-restless. Most of the Net's "emoticons", typographical tricks read sideways to convey smiles, disapproval or a sardonic wink — :), :[, ;) — appeared in fanzines by the 1940s.

General consensus holds that the quality of sf fandom peaked in the 1950s and 60s. That's when I entered, a rank neo, into a community of fanzines honed by criticism and decades-old tradition. The humorous personal essay reigned supreme. Some fans flowered into professionals.

By this time fandom had grown large. It began to split into sub-fandoms, often groups which had little real need for the written word: fans of medieval reenactments, space advocates, costumers. Well before the 1970s, fandoms devoted to other areas had begun, including the early Baker Street Irregulars for Sherlock Holmes, 'zines for the mystery and romance genres, even for model railroaders and bikers.

The Net, like sf fandom, began as a quick exchange medium, under funding for the ARPANet from the Advanced Research Projects Administration of the Department of Defense. ARPANet was designed to be intricately dispersed, hard to break even in a nuclear war.

It linked several national laboratories, where I first used it in 1969, then swelled to include universities, and kept growing. The crucial element was "packet-switching," whereby messages could be routed through any of several different

routes, automatically going around jams and breaks.

Today's Net works the same way, now with many more nodes. All this is the fruit of computers, which can route and control the info-flow even as it has expanded by many orders of magnitude.

I remember sending work-in-progress over the telephone links, on the cranky and cumbersome computers we had then at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratories, as it was called then. For me, it was a handy way of collaborating with plasma physicists at Los Alamos.

The incredible speed — imagine, response within seconds! — encouraged casual conversation, which helped spark ideas. It was fun. You could route the same message to a whole list of users, encouraging on-the-spot brainstorming. We sent data, too, of course, and whole scientific papers.

Demand for user time swelled. I used the tiny Net between national laboratories to invent and propagate the first computer virus, and wrote up the idea on a typewriter — but that's another story. The point is that scientists drove the development of what was supposed to be a purely national defense application. As so often happens in social history, once creative people get their hands on a

new toy, they might make anything of it — and usually do.

By analogy with fandom, we can expect the Net to split into APA-like groups. The current user and interest groups have trouble maintaining their boundaries; once a flamer finds you, he can drop in anytime. Even security codes provide no firm privacy against determined hackers.

Unlike the post office, fandom's first carrier, the Net is a highly public babble. Egalitarian forums can have notoriously low signal-to-noise ratios. In the electronic agora, a mob often drowns out Socrates.

Like the Net's Multi-User Dungeons (where MUDDies find virtual playmates in fantasy worlds), fandom long ago spawned fantasy sub-fandoms devoted to specific authors, settings (mostly medievalists) and world-views. Quickly, in-group vs. out-group became a favorite game.

As "newbies" appear in the Net, after first lurking on chat sessions, their activity will echo the influx into fandom of "neos" who timidly tried out "fanac."

As a recent *New Yorker* cartoon remarked, on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog. Nobody in fandom knew if you were a pimply adolescent, either, if you didn't want them to. This let a first-rank fanzine editor conceal her sex for years, sim-

ply by using her ambiguous name, Lee Hoffman. Others concocted entire fan-writing careers for nonexistent people. You could be anybody, or nobody.

Virtuality — connection without proximity — is a major attraction in both fandom and the Net. Nobody knows you're a dog through the U.S. mails, either.

Fans could be utterly different in their fanzine persona, which may be why both fandom and the Net was invented by individualistic Americans. Sure, we generated it out of ARPANet and the Cold War's focus on organized research labs — but the USSR had those, too, and never allowed a Net to form. They couldn't tolerate the openness which would come from letting the idea grow. Our genius was to spawn from the odd little convenience I knew at Livermore a world metaphor.

On the Net, openness has, alas, led to a torrent of rudeness. Already there is a gathering fear among the usual social censors that the digital universe shall become a cesspool for some ugly fish indeed, child pornographers, con artists and predators of every stripe. As Phil Patton remarked in *Esquire*, the Net was built by professors and is run by sophomores.

The Net has not yet evolved anything to parallel that vital organ,

the genzine. Yet many frustrated users complain of wasted time finding what they want, then understanding its often contorted syntax, wiseacre impenetrability, stilted jargon and outright poor writing.

As fandom grew more variegated, genzines reflected a broadening of interests, carrying personal columns of humor and reflection, science articles, amateur fiction, stylish gossip, and inevitably, thoughtful pieces on the weighty issue of the future of fandom.

By the fandom analogy, then, the Net should soon develop its own form of the genzine, though geared to the new technology. Users will flock to this new entity, avoiding flammers, asininity and noise. After all, the Net is an open invitation to have a hundred million pen pals.

Even with gopher programs, you spend much time filtering the nonsensical and boring. Among these one already finds thoughtful pieces on the weighty issue of the future of the Net.

Just as private correspondence and APAs still thrive, the Net's basics will remain. But a genzine-like entity will arise and command loyalties, particularly from "newbies" who need orientation.

Few people truly want raw data; they seek information, taste, even

wisdom. Filtering the Net gusher is essential, and finder software continues to improve beyond the simple key-word seekers of today. But these still take our scarcest resource: time. Often, gobs of it.

The Net's siren call, people sharing your very own obsession, is addictive for many of us. About seven percent of the USA uses the Net now. The World Wide Web has ten million home pages, where one can display for the virtual passers-by. In less than six months, the number of web pages doubles; the surge is faster than exponential.

Net proselytes abound, proclaiming the coming transformation. This echoes the founder of modern science fiction, Hugo Gernsback, whose letter columns helped start fandom, moving it beyond letter-writing and into local clubs, then fanzines. He proclaimed in a 1930 editorial for *Science Wonder Stories* that from the base of fandom, the world could be changed:

If every man, woman, boy and girl could be induced to read science fiction right along, there would certainly be a great resulting benefit to the community, in that the educational

standards of its people would be raised tremendously. Science fiction would make people happier, give them a broader understanding of the world, make them more tolerant.

Routinely, prophets assume universal benefits from getting everyone hooked into the Net. We are still in the era of fast growth, so it will not be obvious for perhaps a decade more just how many people are simply indifferent to digital charms. Just as science fiction is a mass market phenomenon now, yet some cannot abide it — so shall the Net become.

If the Net's growth profile parallels that of TVs, VCRs and other electronic conduits, it will saturate with over three quarters of the country online: 200-plus million users. But the Net isn't merely national, by saturation time in a decade or two, there could be a billion users.

Language problems will be only a minor barrier by then. Programs for crude translation already flourish on the Net. This cornucopia of contact will need a new generation of filters, and something better than filters.

We want more, sure — and we'll get it — but we also come to want *better*. But even the best filter is inherently passive. None can fulfill

the higher functions of helping to *generate* the quality material most readers want.

Think of trying to find a discourse on, say, the cultural impact of the Beatles. There may be hundreds of candidate World Wide Web sites, but you want a treatment for your twelve-year-old. And you wouldn't mind reading some adult nostalgic reflection on the Fab Four yourself.

First you pick key words: BEATLES, CULTURE, IMPACT, etc. Then you set separate vocabulary levels for both of you, which winnows the fare down to perhaps a few dozen sites. Now add a syntax evaluator, to eliminate erudite postmodern rigmarole your daughter (and probably you, too) couldn't stomach. She won't want to see analysis which compares the Beatles with the Kinks, say, but you might, so you tailor your list for that.

By this time you're facing two customized sets of choices, probably only a handful of potential sources. Only then need real browsing begin.

But who made these documents coherent, deft, interesting?

The author — plus an editor. Someone must go out into the datascape and find the writers who can be urged to do the right job at the right time, and then worry at the extra drafts, polishing it properly.

As Virginia Postrel, editor of *Reason* magazine, has emphasized, the Net Age will become the Editors' Era. It must — by analogy with our present.

In talk radio and late night television, star figures filter the daily info-stream for their simpatico audience. Their following finds them and sticks around, a fandom defined by interest, not geography or income.

Rush Limbaugh is essentially a highly personal editor. On the Net, most people don't want or need an idiosyncratic figure marshalling material for them. But they will come to enjoy a certain style and flavor, just as you tasted many magazines before settling on this one. Rather than favoring a journal of policy wonk-speak, you settled on a rather broader view, savoring the world with an attitude.

A Net genzine would probably begin as a Best Of feature, with pieces gleaned worldwide labeled by interest-area. The better ones will go pro, requiring a fee to log onto the edited database. Authors will get paid. To raise quality, editors will start to demand revisions of raw Net material, using the carrot of payment. Genzines will become labyrinthine magazines.

Probably the Net will end up as the fandoms have today — dispersed, intense, with highly evolved func-

tions to screen out noise. Even at saturation, the Net may be an intense interest for only a small minority. Predictably, that minority will think itself somewhat superior. Using the Net will be a signature of being quite With It. I remember, in a debate over cyberpunk in 1985, when the writer John Shirley accused me of not being "culturally online" because I didn't think cyberpunk was much of a revolution. As it turned out, "online" was already a With It word. John hadn't a clue about the Net, didn't use it, and wasn't actually online — but he knew the jargon. So shall fashion always be.

And data isn't everything. Most people in the world don't write letters or often consult a book. Life looms larger. Much of our shiny future will look much like today, but with more options.

Of course, the analogy is only qualitative. Fanzines started crudely and gradually, as reproduction technology available to the amateur improved, became more fancy, stylistic and hierarchial. Inventive layout and beautiful mimeography (remember that? — rotating drums of ink which pressed their sticky fluid through stencils cut on typewriters) were the standard.

The Net was born in a crude era of computer technology, but now is

growing sophisticated. A vast menu of graphics confronts even the casually interested. Much of the fancy Net-art I've seen online resembles an explosion in a typesetter's shop, but it will settle down.

We can expect, though, increasing use of decision-tree options on the Net, so that intelligent search patterns can bring you quickly where you want to go. Or, better, to a piece of information you didn't know you wanted, but are glad to have once you see it. Hypertext methods are the beginning of this.

Fandom invented a Women-Only APA, a fanzine designed to increase activity itself (appropriately titled *Fanac*), a Secret APA, even a fanzine to reconcentrate interest called *Focal Point*. We should expect the Net to blossom with similarly ingenious social molds and aids.

Analogy to fandom can tell us where we should start. The gratifications of both fandom and the Net are many, but surely they both depend upon a slippery sense of community, on shared mythologies, on semantic codes which convey much in the intricate disguises of worked language.

Just because you're reading this, you're part of a large, shared community — the Folk of the Book. Magazines are really floppy books, an-

nouncing their impermanence by their physical flexibility.

Many of you may not know the Net (yet), or may dislike it, or even fear it. We hear such sentiments in thoughtful pieces about the impending Death of the Book.

I suspect that fevered news about the imminent demise are far off the mark. The genzines I envision could be read on screen, but I doubt it.

Extended pieces — think here of *The New Yorker's* protracted nonfiction, particularly by John McPhee — are wearing, if read in phosphorescent type. The book is an inherently comfortable, portable technology, time-shaped to our liking. We won't give it up. Nor shall we have to — even as Netheads.

Envision a book that interfaces with your computer. You boot up some evening and notice that the latest issue of *Worldview*, your favorite Net genzine, is freshly out. You send your credit card charge number (you *must* get around to setting up a subscription...). The number gets checked in a few seconds, and here comes your "copy," on screen in full color. Plenty of great articles, commentary, humor. Yum yum.

You can download it onto hard copy, of course, and pass it around among friends, this liability is the

flip side of the ease we have in duplicating files. Maybe you do, but since *Worldview* costs only, say, fifty cents, what's the point? You friends can buy it if they want. And who wants all that paper cluttering up the house?

Instead, you download it into a small "microdisk." You use a serial port feeding into a special appliance — or else, embedded in your computer already. Out pops a microdisk (which may be shaped like a cube or a sphere, depending on details of future technology).

Then you go get your book — singular. Since you only need one, it has a hand-tooled leather jacket, is just the size you like, and opens onto pages which feel like fine paper, heavy in cloth content. They aren't paper, of course.

You open your book and power it up; the rechargeable batteries take up most of the spine. The pages are blank, until you insert the microdisk into a port just below the batteries. The pages "light up" in the sense that black type appears against a creamy off-white background. Color illustration fills the allowed pixels.

You start with the table of contents, notice that a brilliant piece by Greg Bear on the new microwave-driven space craft is on page 48. Great; you touch the icon next to the Bear header and turn the page. There's the

Bear piece. If you had touched nothing, just turned the page, you'd have found page 2. It displays a short, witty editorial by Virginia Postrel on the fall of the last Chinese dictator; she argues that the Net helped bring him down. True, but you'd already assumed that. You yawn.

On to the Bear piece. You've designed your book to be compact, so it only has twenty pages. The Bear article has plenty of high-resolution photographs and diagrams, some in sidebars which you also access with a touch. The whole piece exceeds your twenty pages, so after you finish the last page, you then return to the first page and find the rest of the article. A single touch takes you back to an earlier page, if you want to check a point.

Your book will run between five and ten hours without recharging; of course, you can just insert charged batteries from your stock and keep going, or take a half dozen with you on a hiking trip, if you like.

Your book is definitely not a terminal on the Net. It just conveys the Net's bounty to you in a fashion you like. You can fancy up your sole book all you want. Hang the expense, after all it's just one, with maybe a simpler book at work.

And forget about rooms of bulging bookshelves, too — no need to

keep your store of knowledge impressed into what are, after all, the encased bodies of dead trees.

Instead, you keep most books on microdisk. Some of great beauty or treasured memory you keep in real paper. First editions won't go out of style, for those who like them. They'll be appreciated all the more for their true rarity.

Of course, something will be lost in this transition. We won't know what, entirely, until the new tech is enshrined. That's the way the future works — peering through the future windshield, gazing through the fog of time, details are blurred, and we're doing well if we can stay on the path.

In 1964 Marshall McLuhan said, "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." The Net may well shape us into social patterns we have seen before. In other ways, it will return us to what we know: *genzines*, high tech books, the ever more nuanced knowledge of concep-

tual communities like fandom.

Kevin Kelly of *Wired* magazine thinks that the Net will become the dominant force in our culture. I rather doubt it; who in the nineteenth century would have described the Post Office that way? Yet it seemed equally wondrous, at the time.

So did the telephone, a bit later. Both changed the world but did not become a dominant force. They blended into a background which itself never ceased to seethe.

The telephone opens the Net to most of us, so the Net is best seen as a wedding of the Post Office and the telephone — a further working out of the ideas contained in that nineteenth century technology.

But if Kelly is right, an eye cast to our past is even more necessary now.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.



"The Auschwitz Circus," in addition to being the inspiration for Kent Bash's excellent cover and the catalyst for this issue, is also Matthew Wells' first short fiction sale. The story began life as a one-act play, and was performed as part of an evening of ten-minute one-acts by various writers at A Theatre Company in New York City.

Matthew has made his living for the last twenty years acting and writing plays. His produced plays are too numerous to mention, but they include God's Country, which was performed Off-Off Broadway in 1990, The Goose Girl, done in Los Angeles at the Theatre of N.O.T.E, and Wildest Dreams, produced by Lightning Strikes at the Madison Avenue Theatre in New York.

The Auschwitz Circus

By Matthew Wells

IT IS 1938. IN A LITTLE church cemetery in Leonding, Adolf Hitler, one year away from invading Poland, is standing over the grave of his mother and father. He is thinking of his mother's death, only a few days before Christmas in 1907. He has spent Christmas alone ever since. He is already planning to change the celebration of Christmas to a celebration of motherhood, to change even the name of the holiday from *Weißenacht* to *Mutternacht*, from Holy Night to Mother Night. He barely notices the young woman in slacks who is also standing by a grave in the cemetery, but as she turns and looks at him, he does notice the look of joy and triumph in her face, just before she shoots him three times in the head.

"She's obsessed with him," says Nora's husband Louis.

"Hitler?" says Phyllis. She looks at her brother and laughs nervously, which is the only way that she knows how to laugh.

Louis nods. "There's this place. This museum in the Village. The PMS?"

Phyllis screws up her face. "That's the one, what, full of exhibits that never happened, right? — the old Kennedy Museum?"

Louis nods again. "Ever been there?"

Another nervous laugh. "I already go to a place dedicated to things that never happened; it's called the inside of my head. And you know me — why go anywhere else when I can get it at home for free."

"Well, Nora goes to the PMS."

"Nora has no imagination."

"She goes there all the time."

"How often is all the time?"

"Two, three times a week. Right after work. Sometimes on the weekends. On the second floor, it's called the Alternate Reality floor, they have these, I don't know, they're like game rooms. She goes to this one room. The Hitler Room. Because in the Hitler Room, you get to kill Hitler. Before he becomes Hitler. You get to change the course of history."

November 9th, 1923, and Adolf Hitler is driving like a madman in a red Fiat to the Lake Staffel country home of his friend Ernst Hanfstaengl. There is a throbbing in his left shoulder, which has been dislocated and fractured by the weight of the man who fell on it not an hour ago, the man he linked arms with just before the police opened fire on them all in front of the Odeonsplatz in Munich. For the next two days he will hide in the Hanfstaengl attic under a couple of blankets and threaten to commit suicide, until finally he turns himself in to the Bavarian police on the 11th of November. He will be sentenced to five years in prison; he will serve less than nine months.

Hitler glances nervously in his rear view mirror. He half expects to see the motor cars of the police screaming into view behind him as he drives south. What he sees instead is the eyes of the young woman who has been hiding in the back seat, the young woman who is even now swooping forward and looping a length of piano wire around his neck and saying over and over again in English: "Die, you son of a bitch, die."

"And does she?" asks Phyllis.

"Does she what?"

"Change the course of history?"

Louis looks at the ceiling. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because she keeps going back."

It is 1907. Hitler has just been rejected by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The two required drawings that accompany his portfolio, one on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise and one on any incident connected with the legend of Noah's Ark, have been rejected because they have, in the words of one examiner, "too few heads." Nora pictures the future dictator of Germany fuming, wandering the streets of Vienna, imagining pyramids of heads, mountains of heads, oceans of heads, all of them Jewish. Instead, she finds him talking with a friend in an outdoor café, complaining about the professors at the Art Academy, expressing worry about his mother, who is sick in Linz.

Nora walks up to the table. "Excuse me," she says in flawless German, "but are you Adolf Hitler?"

The serious young man stares up at her. "Ja..."

"I have something for you," she says, and reaches into her purse. Before his friend can stop her, she buries a knife into Hitler's belly and begins to carve.

"She keeps going back," says Louis. "And I don't know why."

Phyllis looks at her brother like he's missing the obvious. "Maybe she likes it," she says, because she knows through experience that the only reason why people do anything more than once is because they like it. Even the things they say they hate—if they do it more than once, then deep down, they really like it. "I mean," says Phyllis, "given the chance, wouldn't you do what she's doing? I mean I would. I certainly would."

"But it doesn't *change* anything," says Louis. "How could she think it would change anything?"

Phyllis knows from the way her brother has asked the question that he isn't looking for an answer, he's just trying to understand his wife; but she tries to give him an answer anyway. She thinks for a moment about killing Adolf Hitler before he comes to power in Germany; thinks about how she would do it. A gun? A knife? Explosives? And she realizes that she doesn't know the first thing about where to find Hitler before, say, 1939, or what he looks like. So how does Nora know that?

"Maybe it doesn't change just anything," Phyllis says slowly. "Maybe it just changes Nora." And that, she realizes, that, she can understand.

"Oh it's changed her, all right," says Louis.

"He thinks I'm crazy," says Nora.

I'm shaking my head. "He's your husband; it comes with the territory."

Nora shrugs. "Well, maybe not actually crazy. I mean the weird thing is that he doesn't argue with the principle behind what I'm doing. He just doesn't think it's right for me. Sort of like saying, I don't have anything against smoking — just as long as you don't do it."

"So he's contradicting himself."

"Oh yeah. It's typical."

"Maybe if you showed him what the Hitler Room was like?"

"I've tried. I mean he's only ever been in the Museum once. And he got himself thrown out."

"Thrown out? Why?"

"Well, we were in one of the Kennedy exhibits, the Grassy Knoll? — where you get to be a part of everything, and take pictures?"

"You actually got tickets to that?" It's the single most popular room in the PMS. The only things close to it are the Jack the Ripper and the Little Big Horn.

"I bought the tickets a year in advance. For his birthday. I mean he's a Kennedy nut, he's into all the theories, and I figured, well this is great — he gets to be there, he gets to see it for himself — he'll love it. Well, let me tell you..."

"What happened?"

"The minute he saw the motorcade, the minute it rounded the corner in front of the Book Depository, he was running out into the street yelling stop, stop, there's a guy with a gun, there's a guy with a rifle. And the motorcade screeches to a halt, and Louis is pointing all over the place, and the next thing you know there's Secret Service everywhere, and they've got two gunmen in the book depository, one guy behind us on the grassy knoll, and one guy under a manhole cover in the middle of the street. I mean he ruined it. He ruined it for everybody."

Nora sighs. "He said later, how can you go and just watch? And I said, that's the point. Watching is the point. And he says, oh yeah? Do you just go back and watch Hitler? Which is apples and oranges, and I tell him this, and he's shaking his head saying no, no, no, the point is, if you can go back, you don't just watch. You do something."

I KNOW WHAT HE MEANS. I've killed Hitler. I've been a member of the PMS since the Seventies, when the Hitler Room was my home away from home. I've killed Hitler hundreds of times. And it was never enough. Because it's not about the one who gave the orders, and it's not about the ones who pulled the trigger, and it's not even about the people who died. It's about the people who lived. And did nothing. Like the people in Krakow who watched the Germans take my grandmother away. Who just sat there, and did nothing, like it was some kind of performance, like they were only the audience. It wasn't just the Germans who killed her — it was the people who did nothing. And I never realized that, until I went looking for my grandmother. And found the Auschwitz Circus.

Nora asks: "How old was she?"

"Thirty," I say.

"My grandparents were in their forties."

There is a moment when we just sit there on the museum bench, the granddaughters of women who died when they were younger than we are now.

I try to picture the scene. A black-and-white street in Krakow. A building. Soldiers at the door.

"What are you doing?"

"Victoria Berkovits?"

"What do you want?"

Maybe they tell her she is to be relocated. Maybe they tell her to pack. Or maybe it's, "We just have a few questions to ask you, Fraulein." Questions about your father the Rabbi. Questions about your sister, your daughter. "Just a formality, Fraulein."

They drag her into the street. I try to picture the crowd. Black-and-white people. Silent. Staring. Saying to themselves: "That's Victoria. That's my friend Victoria. I know her. And she knows me." And they turn away. Knowing what is happening to her, and convincing themselves that, whatever is happening to her (and they have no idea what it is), it is only what she deserves.

And what is my grandmother thinking about? Every time I picture it, I get a different answer. Sometimes, she is thinking of her daughter. My mother. Who is with her sister. My aunt. On her way to America. Sometimes she is thinking of my grandfather, two years dead as she is dragged down the

steps of her home in front of her neighbors. And sometimes she is thinking about her neighbors. Her friends. All of them peering at her behind closed windows, behind raised blinds. Peering and doing nothing. Saying nothing. As she is forced into the back of a truck. Does she go quietly? Does she yell and scream? Does she say what I would have said?

Nora says: "Treblinka."

I say: "Auschwitz."

The way we say it is like two strangers shaking hands.

Christmas Eve, 1918. The War To End All Wars has ended, and Adolf Hitler lies half blind and seething in a military hospital in Pasewalk outside Berlin. He is raging against the November criminals, the November traitors who have betrayed the Motherland. He can see their faces even without the use of his eyes. They are all Jewish. They are all laughing at him, laughing at his rotten teeth and his Iron Cross. And he knows that the reason they are laughing at him is because they are afraid of him, and with good reason — because when he regains his sight, he will dedicate himself to ridding the world of every last one of them, a deed the rest of the world will surely allow him to perform, because it is their secret desire, the one they are not strong enough or honest enough to express in full view of the world, as he is. Yes, he thinks, the Jews, he thinks, and he begins to mutter to himself the words of a speech that he could give, a speech that will rouse all of Germany to his side, from the lowliest peasant to the smiling nurse by his bedside who is even now leaning down over him with a pillow in her hands, a pillow that slowly smothers him, a pillow as soft and white as the snow on the cemetery where his mother is buried.

"Will you stop?" says Louis.

"Stop what?"

Louis gestures. "This," he says.

Nora starts to say, "This what?" but the look on Louis' face stops her. She sighs. Pick your fights, she says to herself. You've finally convinced him to come with you to the Museum, so that has to be the absolute last thing you start fighting about. At least today.

They are in the PMS Café, in the Garden Room. The PMS Café has been a Village fixture since it opened its doors in 1967 and instantly became one

of the flagship cabarets in the rise of Off-Broadway theater, producing a number of lost and unwritten plays like Sheridan's *Gallantry*, Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Won*, and Marlowe's *The Maid's Holiday*, the posters for which are hanging behind Louis and Nora's table.

Louis gestures again. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because it's the only thing I *can* do."

"Nora, it doesn't change anything."

"Of course it does. It changes everything."

"Will it bring anybody back to life?"

"Everybody. Every time I do it."

Louis snorts. But he pays the check, and lets Nora lead him into the Museum.

The PMS is not an easy place to find. It's on the corner of West Tenth and West Fourth, which in any other city but New York would be impossible.

Under its original name of the Camelot Hotel, the museum was founded in 1964 and privately funded by anonymous donations from the Kennedy family, who wanted it to be a living shrine to lost innocence, unrealized potential, and the bright future that was forever lost in Dallas in 1963. As a result, nobody ever called it the Camelot Hotel; everybody referred to it as the Kennedy Museum, or the Kennedy Place, the name by which it is still known among the older denizens of the Village.

By the end of the Sixties, the ivy-covered walls of the museum contained the most comprehensive collection in the world of exhibits, photographs, and records of things that never did happen, never could happen, and never would happen, for good or ill. For instance — as you enter, on your left, opposite the doorway to The PMS Café, you will see the very popular Point Of No Return Exhibit. Here you'll find President Bill Clinton actually saying, "No, sorry," to a half-naked woman. Here also is Nixon burning the Watergate tapes on the White House lawn; George Armstrong Custer yelling: "Run away, run away," and, of course, John F. Kennedy saying: "Fuck it, I'm sleeping in today."

In 1984, as part of its 20th Anniversary celebration, the museum went through extensive remodeling and officially changed its name to The Post Modern Salon and began marketing itself under the motto: "Three floors. No reality." (Actually it has four floors — three floors and a mezzanine — but the mezzanine is impossible to find.)

And as part of the remodeling, the entire second floor was redesigned to become the heart of the new museum. Alternate Reality.

"And here we are on the Second Floor," says the guide. He points to his right. "Over the doorway, at the head of the stairs? — that's a picture of John Lennon's fiftieth birthday party." As usual, this announcement gets a couple of low moans. "Third guy on the left, that's Jimi Hendrix."

More moans. Louis shakes his head. Nora holds his arm.

"There are," says the guide, "over fifty rooms on the second floor. Each dedicated to a different theme. For instance, over here is the Off-White House. This is where you'll find President George Armstrong Custer; President Aaron Burr; President Michael Dukakis. And my personal favorite, President George S. Patton."

Louis is standing under a dark television set. "What's this?" he asks.

"Ah," says the guide. "That's the Malcolm X American Express commercial." He switches on the television with a remote control clicker. The screen comes to life, showing Malcolm X, in a dark suit, with a graying beard, sitting alone in a plush banquette.

"Do you know me?" he asks. "Back in the Sixties, I called the Kennedy assassination just another case of chickens coming home to roost. But these days, when I eat my chicken at Lutece, I use the American Express card. Because when I pick up a check, I do it by any means necessary."

A deep announcer's voice: "Cardmember since 1968."

The television clicks off.

"And this," says the guide, "is the very popular Hitler Room."

It is December, 1907. There is snow on the ground. Hitler's mother is being buried in a small cemetery in Leonding. Nora points out the future leader of Germany, and hides behind Louis as she takes a gun out from under her sweater.

Louis looks around, worried. "Nora. There are people watching."

"So what? They won't do anything; they're Germans." She hands Louis the gun. "Here. Go ahead. You do it."

"What?"

"Go ahead — kill him."

Louis looks around nervously. The priest is saying something in German. Everyone is standing with their heads down. Nora is whispering, egging him on. He shushes her. People start staring at them. Especially Hitler, anger in his eyes.

The anger makes it easier. Louis looks into Hitler's eyes and sees a black chimney of smoke boiling up into a gray sky and without thinking he shoots Hitler twice in the chest, then twice in the stomach, then he walks over to the writhing body and puts the fifth bullet between Hitler's eyes.

As Nora predicts, the people around them just watch.

"Jesus," says Louis. He wipes the sweat from his eyes; he feels like he has just spent an hour in a steam room. "Jesus," he says, "what a rush," he says.

"You want a rush," says Nora, "you should try killing him at the Nuremberg Rally."

Louis looks at her like a little boy who has just been handed a new toy. "Can I?"

Nora smiles.

Over the next few weeks, Louis does nothing but kill Hitler.

"It's not enough," he says.

He branches out. He kills everyone in the German High Command. He kills their parents, their lovers, their children, their wives.

"It's still not enough."

He shoots the generals. He murders the soldiers. He hangs the lager Kommandants. Höss. Kramer. Baer. Göth. Weiss. Ziereis. Stangl. He butchers the executives at I.G. Farben who set up their own work camp as part of Auschwitz. Dürrfeld. Tesch. Ter Meer. Schmitz. Einfeld.

And it still isn't enough.

"Why isn't it enough?" says Nora.

"Because it's not just them," says Louis. "It's everybody. Everybody who stood around and did nothing."

A smile grows on Nora's face. "You really believe that?"

"Yes. I do."

Nora's smile gets bigger. It is the smile of a little girl who knows a secret, and knows its power. "Then I have something you have to see," she says. "Then I have something to show you."

In the back of the Second Floor, last room on the right, is the Auschwitz Circus.

The first thing you see is a set of pictures. Pictures taken by Roman Vishniac in the Forties. Pictures of old people. Pictures of crowded ghettos.

And what happens in these pictures, what happens in the room, is that people are taken out of their homes in broad daylight, in front of their neighbors, in front of their friends. Taken out of their homes, past the faces of people who see and do nothing, and piled into hot, sweaty, overcrowded boxcars with no food and no water. From homes all over Europe, these people are sent hundreds of miles away to a distant railroad station, in conditions of unspeakable degradation.

And when they arrive at this railroad station, which gets between ten and fifteen train loads a day, they are unloaded and pushed into line and driven past a chamber orchestra playing Rossini overtures, they're pushed and shoved by guards with dogs and guns down the Himmelstrasse, a long dark tunnel with barbed wire on the walls and ceiling, they're yelled at and barked at and kicked all the way into a huge big top, where the guards throw off their coats and become clowns; the children are given candy, the old men are given food; and the Auschwitz Circus does three shows a day.

And all the people lucky enough to get in, they have a number stamped on their left arm, so they can leave and come back for free whenever they want — days later, weeks later, years later.

The door is never closed. The gates are always open. The show never ends. The Auschwitz Circus.

Louis watches the soldiers as they clear the streets of people. "You mean there are no concentration camps?"

In the background, the soldiers herd them away.

"No." Nora smiles. "No, there are. Thousands of them. All across the continent."

Herd them all away, the silent racists, the willfully blind.

"But in the world of the Auschwitz Circus, all the death camps have been built for the people who do nothing."

The ones who heard and didn't care. The ones who knew and let it happen. The ones who saw and smiled inside.

"They're the ones who go to the gas chamber. The ones who look the other way, and do nothing."

In the background, the soldiers lead them all to darkness. The guilty of Europe. The guilty of England. The guilty of America.

And Nora and Louis smile, and look, and do nothing.

When I think of Louis, I think of what he said to his wife in the Dallas Room. He said to her, "How can you go and just watch? The point is, if you can go back, you don't just watch. You do something."

I think of Louis a lot. And I think of what he's doing now. I never met Louis. But I've seen him. I see him all the time. He's the one on the Second Floor with the camera in his hand, the one taking pictures of the soldiers of the Auschwitz Circus as they march the accomplices of abomination to a fate that no one deserves, not even the guilty.

Nora? I still see Nora, now and then. We say hello but we do not talk, not the way we used to, the way we used to before. She hasn't changed; she's still as angry as the day I met her, still hates as passionately, with a pure white flame. I wonder how she does it. The fire of anger is a righteous fire, but you can't just light it and expect it to live forever. Time, like a steady rain, drizzles it to death, washes it away until nothing is left but the cold comfort of forgiveness. It's a fire, after all. You have to feed it to keep it burning. And sometimes I think Nora is keeping hers alive by feeding it the one thing she can't afford to lose. Her life.

I don't have time for that anymore. When I go to the PMS, I always go to the Second Floor, but it's where I go to think. It's where I go to reflect. And it's where I go to see my grandmother.

"Victoria?"

She comes out of the dark, she comes out of the black-and white past, the woman I am named after.

She sits next to me. Hugging me. Smelling of flowers.

"And who is this?" she says to the little boy beside me.

"This is Zachary," I say. "Zachary," I say, "this is your great-grandmother."

"Hello, Zachary," she says, and gives him a little kiss on the forehead. "This is for you," she says, and hands him a big red balloon. She looks up at me. "He's beautiful," she whispers.

"Balloon," says Zachary.

There are tears in my eyes. When I wipe them away, my grandmother has Zachary cradled in her arms. "If you like balloons," she says to Zachary, "you're going to love the clowns."

And she reaches out to take my hand as we head down the hall to the Auschwitz Circus. ¶

In 1995, Jacquelyn Hooper sold two stories to F&SF. "Acheter" is the second. The first will see print later in the year. Why do editors do such things? Well, I do them for esoteric reasons that seem to matter only to other editors: issue balance, length, and something quite vague. Some stories introduce an author to her audience better than others. "Acheter" is an excellent introduction to Jacquelyn Hooper.

Jacquelyn is originally from Los Angeles. She has a Master of Fine Arts from Arizona State University, and she attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop. "Acheter" is her first short fiction publication.

Acheter

By Jacquelyn Hooper

PECOLA WAS WAITING FOR her dinner and pear in the Food and Clothing Dispersement line at the Unistore when she saw the dog.

At least, she thought it was a dog. Small, white, and a hundred yards away, it came into view under the harsh security lights around the Unistore trash dumpsters for only a second before it streaked back into the darkness.

She stared at the dumpsters, hoping to see it again. Dogs were rare; you didn't just see them walking around alone, especially on the Unistore lot at night. What she'd seen was probably a rat, or the arm of some vag waiting to jump a clerk dumping garbage.

Pecola was shoved from behind; she turned around. Facing her was a man bundled in a large, heavy green coat, with a torn shirt draped around his neck for a scarf. His face was barely visible under the bill of a painter's cap.

"Wellington?" she asked, realizing he was on her freeway landscaping crew. "What's your problem?"

"Sorry, P," he said. "But it's pears. You know."

"Yeah, I know." She flipped him off, then turned around. The F.C.D. only served pears once a year, twice when the privately owned Unistore, Incorporated gave the F.C.D. the fruit they deemed too bruised or spoiled to sell to the quarters.

Dogs were rare. Pears were rarer.

Pecola looked at the dumpsters. She caught a glimpse of a short, stubby tail as it wagged under the light before it disappeared again.

"Save my spot," she told Wellington.

She walked out of the F.C.D. line and past the guards patrolling for vags to get to the dumpsters. The smell of mold and decay was strong as she knelt down to examine the area outside of the security lights. Her hand touched something soft and sticky on the asphalt just as a pair of paws landed on her thighs. Moments later, the dog was licking her face.

"Where you from, huh?" she asked, wiping her hand against a dumpster, then scratching behind the dog's ears.

It wore a collar. Its name was Kewpie.

Pecola picked up the dog and carried it back with her to the line. Guards watched her as they talked into their portable phones, their faces obscured by night lenses and wide-brimmed hats. Wellington reached out to pet the dog. Soon a small crowd gathered around her.

"Whose is it?" Wellington asked. "Marlowe's?"

"Marlowe's dog," someone said.

"Right," Pecola said, feeling the dog squirm in her arms. Better to let them believe it was Marlowe's than have someone try taking it from her.

A guard, his face red from the cold, approached, his blue mittens clashing with the black of his uniform. The name tag on his chest said Rudy.

"No cutting in line," he said. "And no meal until you get rid of that cat."

"It's not a cat," Pecola said.

"I don't care what it is." Up close, Rudy smelled of beef stew, the F.C.D. meal for the day. "The only animals get fed around here is you lot. Now get rid of it."

She looked at Wellington for support. He stared at the fence the Unistore put up to keep the quarters from watching them in the food line while they parked their cars. Conversation stopped around her, but no one moved. They stared at each other or the barrel of pears that had just been wheeled out.

Only the guards who'd been marking the line looked at her now. They'd put away their phones, and were now holding their guns.

Pecola could feel their stare as she left the line, Kewpie still in her hands.

Blue light from the Unistore sign lit a path for her as she walked from the rear of the building to the Row, where Marlowe was.

The Row was a piece of public property next to the Unistore parking lot where the vags begged for handouts. Pecola passed several vags before she found Marlowe. He was sitting on a fire hydrant, handing out business cards to the quarters as they passed. Most gave him change, then dropped the cards in the parking lot.

She coughed to get his attention. He turned toward her, his dog tags clinking against his chest. He stared at her, his brown eyes wide, first taking her in, then Kewpie.

He scratched his beard, then knelt down to the side of the curb.

"Kill it," he said.

"What?" Pecola asked.

He picked up the cards from the parking lot and returned them to the stack in his hands. "Abandoned, right? Means it's sick. Maybe I could pass it off on the underground as purebred, maybe not. Not worth it, either way."

"It's got a tag, so it's got an owner." She frowned. "Stop shitting me, Marlowe. I need your help."

"P, I don't care. I got better things to do." He caught some change tossed to him by a quarter in a blue suit. "Now, fly. You're in my way."

She looked back at the F.C.D. line. It moved quickly now. People walked away with boxed meals, or sat in the lot, eating and talking.

Fast line, she thought, annoyed. It meant the pears were gone.

She glared at the dog. It panted as it returned her stare.

A few minutes later, Pecola had returned the dog to the dumpsters.

I should've known better, she thought, giving Kewpie's ears a final scratch. There hadn't been a moment yet in her life where doing something free for someone else ever got her anywhere. No one did her any favors. When was she going to learn?

"Kewpie!"

Pecola looked up. A quarter in a plum skirt and green coat stood a few feet away. Standing beside her was a brown-skinned guard.

The little dog left Pecola's hands, bounded toward the quarter, then leapt into her arms when she knelt down to catch it.

"Thank you!" She hugged the dog tight as she approached Pecola. "I don't know how he got away from me."

Pecola shrugged, and looked at the guard. His uniform was green, instead of black. His face was long and angular; his dark eyes were wide and clear, unhindered by night glasses or a hat brim.

He stared at her. She thought she saw the corner of his mouth move up.

"Sky, hold him, please," the quarter said, removing a thin, black leash from her shoulder bag. She connected it to Kewpie's collar, then took out her wallet.

"I'm sure I've got some change here somewhere...damn, it's in my car. Well, never mind. You can have this." She took a wad of bills from her wallet and pressed them into Pecola's hand. "It's not much, but it's something."

"We should return to the store, ma'am," Sky said, putting the dog on the ground.

Kewpie's owner took the leash and walked away, the dog pulling her onward. Sky mouthed the words "thank you" to Pecola before catching up with his charge.

She stared at the wad of cash in her hand. The paper bills felt unreal to her; everything she earned from work immediately went into the BankNet system to pay off her debts accrued since birth, including the food and clothes she got from the F.C.D. The only people left to use real money were the ultra rich, the quarters.

And the vags, who weren't on the F.C.D. and scrambled for survival outside of the system. But except for Marlowe, most vags earned change, and saw a one or a five once a week if they were lucky.

Kewpie's owner had given her a vag's jackpot: a ten, three twenties, and four fifties.

Pecola stood closer to the light around the trash dumpsters. She recounted the bills, then rubbed them between her fingers; no ink came off on her hands like the bills one of her neighbors made in his apartment. These were the real thing.

She put the money in her pocket and ran toward the Unistore, past the food line, and to the guard's gate separating the customer entrance from the F.C.D. area.

She had never been in the Unistore before. The closest she had come was the first time she'd gone there to get a meal alone. She'd gotten the meal, but made a wrong turn when she left, and ended up in the customer parking lot.

She saw the Unistore's tinted windows, the rose bushes and red carpeting leading up to the doorway, and the guards pushing the customers' carts to

their cars, before the vags on the Row screamed at her to come over to them before she was arrested.

She remembered the things she'd seen in the carts: clothing, furniture, toys, plants. Everything there was to be sold was done through a Unistore.

Including food. Who needed F.C.D. pears, she thought, when she could get her own?

Rudy was in the guard's gate booth when she got there. He sat on a stool, making notes on a dog-eared yellow pad and listening to Kyle Lokie, the radio psychologist, as he gave advice to a man trying to deal with the fact his girlfriend had left him.

"Past the fence is Unistore staff and customers only," he said, without looking up.

"I am a customer," she said.

"You smell like F.C.D." He turned down the radio and looked at her. "You look like it, too."

Pecola began to walk forward. Immediately, Rudy was on his feet, blocking her path. She could hear the jingle of chains and belts as another guard ran toward them.

"Got some action?" the second guard asked.

"Naw," Rudy said. "This one thinks she's somebody. Wants to pass through."

"How bad you think she wants to pass?" The guard approached her. "Hey, baby. We'll let you by. Hang in the booth with us awhile, so we can work out the details."

They continued to laugh and whistle at her as she walked away.

Pecola stood in line again, her arms crossed. She could see Wellington and a few others sitting on the ground, eating stew with plastic forks, drinking coffee from plastic cups. Their pears sat to the right of them on napkins, the light from the Unistore sign giving them a bluish, radioactive hue.

She was halfway through the line when the Unistore staff wheeled the food warmers away.

"We're out," a voice said over a loud speaker. "Those who did not get a meal will receive a credit on their accounts."

Damn it, Pecola thought. They wouldn't serve the next meal until tomorrow afternoon. By that time, she would be halfway through her shift on

Interstate Ten, pulling weeds, picking up trash, and spraying the strawberry plants on the dividers with Baby Emetine Solution to keep the birds and the vags from eating them.

Working around B.E.S. had to be done on an empty stomach. She would miss breakfast, she would miss lunch.

She looked at the guard's gate booth. Rudy still sat at his post, the buzz of the radio increasingly louder as the people who'd been in the F.C.D. line walked away. He ate a pear as he continued his note taking.

The thought of going to a restaurant outside of a Unistore crossed her mind. But if she couldn't get past Unistore security, she knew she couldn't get past the hired guns in front of a Snack N Shack.

Pecola began to walk home. She was better off saving the money, and skipping the meal. It wouldn't be the first time she'd gone without her daily F.C.D. In those days, though, she'd been a child, and her family had a garden growing in their corner of the projects. They'd also had a stove to cook on.

"P, wait up."

She turned around. Marlowe jogged toward her; his dog tags clinking as he approached.

"You want in the Uni? Number one, never ask the overseer." He put out his hand. "Show me what the quarter gave you to work with."

She crossed her arms. "You told me to fly an hour ago."

Marlowe shook his head. Pecola turned her gaze toward the parking lot. It was a big deal when you went to Marlowe for help, and he said yes. It was a bigger deal when he came to you with a proposition.

But not to her. She lived in the same building with the man, and had dated him on and off enough times to know that even with his G.I. Bill degrees and mysterious ways, he was no different than any other man she knew.

Marlowe removed a small bottle from his coat, and drank the contents. She smelled cranberry juice on his breath as he talked.

"I'll get you in for half of what Miss Two Bits gave you for the mutt," he said.

"It was a lhasa apso, and you know it. No sale."

He tapped the bottle against his leg. "Fine. When you fall on your ass on the freeway 'cause you didn't eat, don't blame me."

He started to walk away. Pecola watched him for a moment before running after him.

"Half," she said. "You get me in, you get half after we leave."

"You pay me when we get in. Then you're on your own."

Marlowe removed his dog tags from his neck, and put them in his coat pocket, along with the fruit juice bottle. Then he walked toward the F.C.D. area.

Pecola followed. Guards who had stood around, talking, paused to watch them as they went by. People sitting in the lot, eating their pears and talking, ceased to do both when she and Marlowe passed them.

They rounded the corner near the dumpsters out of sight of the security cameras, before emerging under the yellow glow from the light over the employees' entrance. Two guards and a pair of potted shrubs stood on either side of the doorway.

"Short cut!" Marlowe yelled to the guards.

"Keep moving!" the guards yelled back.

When they walked into the darkness of the next corner, Marlowe stopped.

"There's a door there," he said. "Watch."

He took her hand, and pressed it against the wall. The tile was cool, grainy, and slick with dirt and grime. Marlowe moved her hand slowly across the tile, until she gasped.

There was a spot under her hand where the tile was cracked. Warm air seeped through it, curling around her fingers.

Marlowe removed his hand from hers. He guided his hands along the crack in the tile, rising up on his toes as he followed the door's outline, looking for a loose spot.

"Put your hands here," he whispered. "Move 'em real fast, up and down."

Pecola moved to where his hands were. The tile under her fingers was cool and loose and it squeaked. She realized it was a panel on a spring. As she shook the panel, one of the tiles above her glowed red. Marlowe used the fruit juice bottle to smash in the glowing tile.

Pecola heard a blip. She pulled her hand away from the tile, just as the door opened a crack.

Marlowe opened it further. "Go!"

Pecola went in. Marlowe grunted behind her as he squeezed himself through the opening. Seconds later, the door closed with an air-tight hiss.

Marlowe walked around her in the dark, then grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

"Where are we?" she asked.

"The dummy tunnel. It's for Unistore staff in case of robbery attempts. Management has the remote that opens it. There's no cameras or guards around it so staff can get out and the cops can get in without being seen."

She let him pull her along, down corridors with carpeting, half constructed walls, and dim lighting. She wondered how Marlowe knew the layout of the Unistore, then shook the thought away. If he wasn't going to tell her how she could swing electricity, phone service, and a one-bedroom apartment without being on the F.C.D. like he did, then he wasn't going to answer that one.

He admitted to her once that he had a degree in electrical engineering and had been kicked out of the Army for unauthorized hacking, then refused to discuss it again. That had annoyed her no end.

They stopped a few feet from what Pecola thought was a wrong turn.

"Quiet," he said, releasing her hand.

She lost sight of him for a moment until he slid open a panel in the wall before her. Pecola found herself staring into an empty beige and orange room; directly across from her was another door. The smell of burnt popcorn was in the air, as well as the sound of piped-in music.

"Half of what you got," he said, picking up a microwave popcorn bag from a chair and dumping the burnt popcorn in the trash. "That was the deal."

"Where are we?" she asked.

"The employee's lounge." He closed the panel in the wall. "Hurry up."

Pecola gave him a fifty and a twenty. Marlowe shoved them into his pocket, then walked up to a red metal fire box. He wrapped the popcorn bag around his hand and smashed the fire box's glass with his fist.

"Now, you're on your own," he said, grinning. He slammed the lounge door behind him as the alarm blared in the room.

Damn it! she thought, looking around wildly. One of the doors in the lounge led to the women's dressing room; she pushed the door open and ran inside.

The dressing room was hot and humid. Steam covered the mirrors lining the walls. The sound of the alarm dimmed under the noise coming from a leaky shower and two women in conversation.

Pecola crept along a line of lockers and hid behind a towel hamper. The women walked into the room, towels around their bodies, shower caps on

their heads. When they passed in front of the hamper, Pecola could see their bare feet as they stopped in front of their lockers, and could smell the baby lotion they were using on their arms and legs.

"So what'd Rudy do then?" one asked.

The other laughed. "Stood there holding those flowers and looking stupid. Mike would've kicked the crap out of him if I hadn't stopped him."

"You should've let him. After the way Rudy treated you, it's too late to try and propose, you know?"

A locker door closed, then another. Pecola watched their bare feet slip into hose and pink flat slippers. They sprayed Jean Naté perfume and hair spray, which caused them to cough; Pecola held her breath.

A wet towel sloshed above her into the hamper. Another thrown towel missed, hitting Pecola in the face and landing in her lap, but the woman who had tossed it didn't retrieve it.

When the women left, Pecola pushed the towel on the floor. She could still hear the alarm buzzing; security hadn't come in yet, but it didn't mean they weren't standing outside the door, waiting.

Damn Marlowe, she thought. At least she hadn't given him all the money she'd promised.

Her legs fell asleep while she knelt, yet she didn't move. She concentrated on the sound of the alarm until it stopped.

Pecola went to the door and looked under it. She saw the feet of the two women, along with the black, rubber soled boots of two guards. Pecola couldn't hear their conversation.

The group moved away from the door. Then the lights went out in the lounge.

Pecola stood up. There were no windows or other doors in the dressing room, and without Marlowe, she couldn't backtrack the way she'd come in. The only way out was through the store itself.

She sat on a bench, and leaned against the lockers. She could imagine what they would do to her when they caught her. Her F.C.D. credit line would be erased, her job would be gone. There'd be no trial. The fact she was on F.C.D. negated the necessity of one.

She'd end up like her sister Cammie, after she'd liberated a pair of boots from a quarter's car three years ago. They'd sent her to Hooverville, the work camp outside of town.

Pecola scratched her wrist. Hooverville had changed her sister; she never left the apartment by day anymore, or went near a man if she could help it. She didn't even vag. All the food and clothes she got came from ratting, breaking into warehouses and abandoned buildings and taking what she needed.

Pecola's wrist stung as she dug her nails into her skin. That wasn't going to happen to her. She wouldn't let it.

She locked the dressing room door, then peeled off her overcoat, her pale pink flannel, her gray wool vest and the yellow sweat stained tee underneath. The jack boots went next, followed by her jeans, three pairs of socks and the women's briefs Cammie got her for Christmas.

Pecola left the clothes by the hamper, then got a pair of towels from a shelf, grabbed some soap and shampoo, and went to the showers.

The showers lined up along two walls, separated by stainless steel stalls. The concrete floor was rough against her feet. Music spurted from a speaker over her head.

The warm water startled her. Marlowe, in one of his rare generous moods, once offered to swing free gas or electricity for everybody in their building for a year. Everyone voted for electricity.

Only Pecola voted for gas. She had good memories of it; nights when her family roasted baby franks and marshmallows over the stove, or warmed themselves against it. When she studied, and the power was out, if it wasn't by the golden light of candles, it was by the blue haze of gas flames.

The water for showers and cooking was hot. Always.

Pecola lathered up, and stood under the full force of the jet. The week's dirt and soap suds descended slowly down her body, covering the shovel scar on her hands, the bug bites on her thigh, until everything associated with the world outside went down the drain in a whirl of steam and bubbles. She washed her hair, knowing the shower would put back the kinks Cammie insisted on taking out, even though her hair was too short to straighten.

The overhead speakers played a violin heavy version of "Bring It On Home To Me." Pecola hummed along, standing so the water hit her back, her eyes closed.

"Hello?" a male voice asked. It came from the entryway to the showers.

Slowly, she turned off the shower. Sam Cooke frizzled out on the speaker above her, and was replaced by "A Fine Romance."

"Yeah," Pecola said, her heart beating quickly. "I mean, yes, what is it?"

"Security, ma'am. We caught a vag who broke in here an hour ago. He claims he's alone, but we're checking the area again to be sure."

She opened the stall door a crack. She could see the guard's green slacks and black shoes as he stood inside the doorway. She could also see the clothes hamper. Her things were gone.

"Have you seen anything?" he asked.

Pecola cleared her throat. "No."

"If you do, let me know. My name's Sky. I'll be out on the floor for the next two hours."

She heard his footsteps as he walked away, followed by the closing and bolting of the dressing room door.

Pecola grabbed her towel and stepped from the shower stall. She could see where her clothes had been as she approached the spot. Two benches over, someone had put another pile of clothes. Next to them was her money and a yellow claim ticket for the Unistore One Hour Cleaners.

Pecola sat beside the clothes. She remembered Sky from the dumpsters. Why didn't he turn her in?

Maybe it's a test, she thought. So they can trump up the charges when I leave. I can say they gave me this stuff, and no one'll believe me.

She picked through the clothes. They were brand new, and in odd sizes. There were a pair of slippers like the Unistore clerks wore, along with some black and silver socks. Red tags hung from buttons, bra straps, and half sealed packages of underwear.

Pecola smiled. Sky had given her a pile of clothes yet to be put on sale. It would be a year before she saw these clothes again, in the F.C.D. line, when the quarters would've long forgotten them and the Unistore employees had taken their pick of what was left.

After fashioning an outfit from the clothes, she looked at herself in the mirror. She had layered a green shirt over a white sweater and a pink skirt. The socks didn't match her outfit; she'd put them in her sweater and bra to use later. The shoes she'd stuffed with tissues. She smelled of lemon hand lotion from the bathroom dispensers.

She could pass as a Unistore clerk.

No, better, she thought. A Unistore customer.

The first thing Pecola did when she stepped into the Unistore from the employee's entrance was slip on the floor.

She grabbed a clothes rack to balance herself. The interior of the Unistore was structured like a warehouse. Soft white fluorescent bulbs buzzed overhead. Sections were separated by products and filled with blinking lights and displays. When Pecola looked down at the industrially waxed floor, she could see her reflection.

The store was full of people, but there was no sign of any guards.

Pecola walked slowly. The shoes were comfortable, but the leather soles made the sliding worse. Looking at the layout of the store, she saw that the aisles were tiled, while the shopping areas were carpeted.

The grocery was against the far wall.

"Tell me the price of this skirt."

Pecola turned around. She was standing in the woman's apparel section. Kewpie's owner stood behind her, holding a tan leather skirt. She stroked the skirt, flattening the wrinkles in the fabric. Her plum polished nails left grooves in their wake.

"Well?" the woman asked.

"Well what?" Pecola asked.

The woman shoved the skirt back on the rack. "I can't believe the service in this place." She began to look around. "Where's the floor manager?"

"Lady, I'm a customer." Pecola held her gaze steady with the woman's.

Kewpie's owner blushed, and smiled apologetically. "It was an honest mistake. You know."

Yeah, I know, she thought, restraining herself from flipping her off as she walked away through the racks of skirts and blouses. When she was sure the woman was out of earshot, she laughed.

But looking at the clothes around her sobered her up immediately. She thought to just snag something to eat for herself and Cammie, but she realized she could get more.

Like clothes. And for herself, a disc player to wear at work. And jewelry.

Don't push your luck, she thought, taking a cream-colored blouse from a rack and looking it over. Just because Kewpie's owner didn't recognize her, it didn't mean no one else would. Fooling quarters was one thing, but the Unistore staff?

The familiar sound of jingling chains on guard uniforms caused Pecola to shove the blouse back on the rack and look around. Across the way, in the

sporting goods section, three security guards were half pushing, half dragging Marlowe across the floor.

Other customers began lining up along the carpet's edges, murmuring their approval of Marlowe's capture. She froze, unsure of what to do. The guards dragged Marlowe toward the security office, next to the Unistore One Hour Dry Cleaners. Pecola lost sight of them as more customers gathered at the scene, blocking her view.

A guard in a green uniform stepped in front of her. Pecola started to run until she realized it was Sky.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said, escorting her away from the commotion. "I know his type. He just broke in here to make the staff look like fools, not to steal from the store. We'd have let him go by now, except for this."

He reached into his coat and pulled out an envelope. Pecola stared at it for a moment before taking it. It was thick with bills.

"He said he took it from your clothes in the dressing room," Sky said. "If you press charges, we take him to Hooverville."

She stared at the commotion around Marlowe. "It's not necessary."

"One of the guards at the employee's entrance confirmed our vag wasn't alone. They're searching the employees' lounge." He glanced at his watch. "When my shift ends in an hour, the search moves out on the main floor."

She stared at his watch, too. It was the wind-up kind; the crystal was scratched and hazy, but the numbers were still visible.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll keep that in mind."

He tilted his hat. "Would you like a shopper to assist you?"

Pecola shook her head. He tipped his hat again, and walked toward the thinning group of customers around the security door.

THE MONEY IN THE ENVELOPE totaled five hundred and fifty dollars once she'd taken out the money she'd given Marlowe.

Pecola made the discovery as she sat on a bench next to the Unistore grocery. He would carry that much juice on him, she thought. No one was stupid enough to try and roll him for it.

If it was his money. She wondered if Sky had put something in there, too?

She looked around. Sky was easy to spot, standing taller than the other guards waiting outside the security office door.

Crazy cute, she thought, watching him drink from a Styrofoam cup. But she still didn't understand why he was helping her.

As for Marlowe's help, she was afraid to consider the possibilities.

She looked at the money in her hands. There was so much she wanted and could buy, now, but not enough time. What did she want the most?

She stood up and headed for the Unistore grocery. Her counting and thinking had left her with forty-five minutes to go before Sky was off his shift, and she would be on her own.

The grocery was warm and festive. Women in pink coats, white skirts and pink shoes pushed carts around the isles. Customers sat at tables eating and drinking samples of food brought out by models in chef's clothes, in suits, in swimwear. Arrow lights in different colors blinked haphazardly in the floor beneath her feet.

A thin, pale woman in a pink coat with red hair and freckles approached Pecola, smiling.

"Need a shopper?" she asked. "My name's Katie."

"No thanks." Pecola looked around. "You got a cart or a basket or something?"

"I will procure one for you. Will you be waiting for it here, or would you rather I brought it to you in one of our sections?"

"One of the sections." Pecola paused. "Produce."

Katie nodded. "Selected or individual?"

"What?"

"In our selected section we choose the fresh fruits and vegetables according to your personality, religion, or medical needs. You choose your own from our individual produce section, which is the most comprehensive of its kind in the world."

"Yeah." She tapped her foot. "The last one."

"Follow the red arrows in the floor to the back."

The individual produce section was as quiet as a library. Fruit and vegetables were stacked on green wooden bins, under signs listing their properties, varieties, and price per pound.

Pecola checked the walls for a clock. There was none.

Her eyes darted back and forth as she scanned the isles, passing oranges and lemons, pineapples and kumquats, apples and strawberries, until she reached the pears.

Her choices were Anjou, Seckel, Bosc, Kieffer and Bartlett. She smiled.

The rattle of metal against tile caused several people in the area to look up from their browsing with annoyance. Moments later, Katie parked a shopping cart beside her.

"Is there anything else you need?" she asked.

Pecola looked at the cart. She wondered if it would be big enough.

"There's a sale on eggs," Katie said. "Everything we stock. Chicken, turkey, duck, goose. There's a two for one on goose."

"I'll think about it. Thanks."

Pecola ripped several plastic bags from the wire hanger over the pear tables, then began shoving as many pears as she could into each bag. She weighed them on the hanging scale beside the tables, subtracting the number from the amount of cash she had which she had written on the outside of the envelope.

On her way out of produce, she grabbed several pre-packed bags of grapes, onions, garlic, potatoes, and tomatoes.

She pushed the cart out of the grocery, using its momentum to keep her from slipping on the floor. She stopped in hardware, where several men in red coats and black slacks approached her simultaneously.

"Do you carry stoves?" she asked. "Small gas ones?"

They pointed her to a display against the wall. She took one, along with several small gas packs, and was about to leave when she saw the discount table.

It was filled with gardening equipment.

Pecola's cart bumped into the tables, causing both table and cart to slide a few inches before stopping. She picked up a trowel, a small rake, and several plastic red pots. They were 75 percent off, along with seed packets and a watering can.

She removed the fruit from the cart, and put the gardening equipment inside. She shoved the portable gas stove under the cart, and put the fruit in on top. Slowly, she made her way out of hardware.

She looked up at the clock. Sky was off duty in twenty minutes.

Pecola pushed the cart toward the grocery again. She saw a pair of guards talking in women's wear to a brown-skinned clerk; one was the man who'd hassled her with Rudy at the guard's gate station. As the men laughed, the clerk picked up a phone, and talked into the receiver.

Moments later, Sky appeared at the counter. He said something to the guards, who immediately left.

Sky began talking to the clerk, who smiled. Pecola shoved her cart into the grocery. She had things to do. Evidently, she thought, so did he.

The number of people in the grocery had dwindled. Katie sat under a sign that said Shopping Assistance, beside two shoppers who were talking. Katie's eyes were closed, and her arms were crossed.

"Hey," Pecola said. "Where's spices? Flour, sugar, stuff like that?"

The shoppers who were talking nudged Katie, who opened her eyes.

"International or North American?" she asked.

"The stuff you'd use at home."

She stared at Pecola a moment, then stood up. The other shoppers began to rise also, but Katie gave them a look, and they sat down.

"Who do you work for?" Katie asked, pulling her out of earshot of the others.

"Myself." Katie wore a watch; Pecola glanced at it. "Well?"

"Last aisle to the right. Bottom shelf."

Pecola reached into her pocket and pulled out the envelope. She peeled out a twenty dollar bill and gave it to Katie. Instead of taking it, Katie reached into her jacket pocket and gave her a card.

"When you get to the register, tell the cashier you're paying cash. Then give that to her," she said, her voice low. "That way the store pays my tip, plus commission."

Pecola took the card, and proceeded to the far aisle. She grabbed as many spices and cooking oils as she could fit into the cart. Then she turned it around, and pushed it out of the grocery area.

She glanced up at the clock. She had fifteen minutes.

"What else do you need?"

Pecola turned around. Katie was pushing a cart toward her with pots and pans, their handles covered with red discount stickers. There was also two dozen eggs in the cart; she was relieved to see they were chicken.

"I didn't think all of that food was for you," Katie said. "Cook books are over where those flashing lights are. You need anything else?"

"Same card?" Pecola asked.

"Yeah." She grinned. "After tonight, we'll both be off F.C.D. food for awhile. I'll put this in line."

Pecola watched her push the cart toward the front of the store. She pushed her own cart toward the pulsing lights. A sweet, pulpy smell rose from the books. She piled the cart with three cookbooks, a pair of paperback novels, and a book on gardening.

Pecola took off her shoes and pushed the cart toward the front of the store, picking up a discounted disc player and as many discounted discs as she could on her way to the register. Katie was waiting for her in one of the lines, guarding the cart she'd been pushing.

She gave Pecola a wave as she walked back to the grocery section.

"Employer's debit, credit card, or temporary F.C.D.?" the cashier asked.

Pecola looked at the cashier. The woman wore glasses, and smelled of Jean Naté. Her hair was held back by a white headband. She didn't look at Pecola as she pulled the groceries from her cart and put them on the conveyer belt.

"Cash," Pecola said. She pulled Katie's card from her pocket, along with the dry cleaning stub. "Shit. Where's the dry cleaner?"

The cashier yawned. "Far wall near the security office."

Pecola gave the cashier Katie's card, then walked barefoot to the dry cleaners, her shoes in her hand. She almost collided with another shopper who was pushing a cart for a set of elderly quarters.

She gave her ticket to the dry cleaner. He told her to wait.

Pecola put her shoes on just as the door to the security office opened. Rudy stepped out, holding a cup of coffee. It sloshed out of the cup, just missing Pecola's feet.

"Excuse me," he said.

Pecola turned her head toward the window and nodded. She heard him walk away, whistling "Bring It On Home To Me" as he left.

The dry cleaner put a bag in her hand, then closed the window.

Pecola took her clothes, and walked back to the line. The cashier had almost finished ringing up her purchases.

"Five hundred, thirty-three dollars," she said. "And twenty-seven cents."

Pecola paid her the money. She watched the cashier count out the bills under a small black light, then turn the bills so they were all face up and lined up accordingly.

Something licked her ankles, and Pecola looked down. Kewpie stared up at her, its tail flicking back and forth. She knelt down to pet it.

"Excuse me," Kewpie's owner said. She picked up her dog and walked toward the exit.

The cashier gave Pecola her change. When Pecola tried to push the shopping carts, they wouldn't budge.

"Let me do that for you, ma'am," Rudy said, dropping his empty cup in a trash can by the exit as he approached her.

"Thanks," Pecola said. Cautiously, she moved away from the carts.

"You drive a red coup, right? Always park in the back?" He looked her over as he put his hands on a cart. "You look familiar."

"So do you. Like to whistle Sam Cooke, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry about the coffee." He was about to say something else when he glanced at the bags of pears in her cart.

"Tangelo, what are you doing?"

Pecola turned around. Sky walked toward them. He gave her a polite nod before looking at Rudy.

"I'm doing my job," Rudy said.

"Mrs. Hart needs help with her cart. She was here first." He pointed toward Kewpie's owner as she waited by the exit. "Go assist her."

Rudy was looking at the other bags of pears in Pecola's cart. Then he looked at her again. "She's F.C.D. She ain't supposed to be in here!"

"Let me explain something to you. Come over here."

Sky pulled Rudy aside. Pecola watched Sky's face harden as he talked. Rudy grew tense, and clenched his fists. She picked up snatches of what their conversation was about: the F.C.D. line, Mrs. Hart's missing dog versus cats, the security guard's booth and complaints.

Sky mentioned it was all caught on newly installed security cameras, then nodded toward Mrs. Hart. Without another word, Rudy went to assist her.

Pecola strained as she began to push the lighter of the carts toward the door. She heard the clicking of the other cart on the tile as Sky pushed it beside her.

"Where you parked, ma'am?" he asked. He looked tired.

"Far gate," she said.

Cold air singed her face and bare hands as she stepped outside. It was strange to see the parking lot from the Unistore: cars moved slow as they tried to avoid hitting the guards and Unistore shoppers pushing carts for customers who had yet to find their parking spaces.

Sky said nothing as they pushed the carts through the lot. The other guards in the lot ignored them. When they passed the Row, the vags lowered their hands and stared.

Marlowe was back at his post, handing out his business cards. Sky stopped and reached into his pocket. He handed Marlowe one of his cards. Marlowe stared at him a moment, before handing Sky one of his. Both men put them in their pockets.

"Watch these for me, would you?" she asked Marlowe.

She pulled Sky aside, then reached into her pocket. There was still money in her envelope. She prepared to give him half, when he put his hand on her arm.

"Not necessary," he said.

"I have to pay you for the clothes." She put the money in his palm, then squeezed his hand. "Thank you for this."

Sky nodded. He put the money in his coat, and pulled out another card. He gave it to Pecola.

"Good night," he said, then walked back toward the store.

Pecola watched him disappear among the quarters and the cars. Pecola read his card by the soft white light of the street lamps.

His name was James Sky, Chief of Security for Unistore, Incorporated. His number was written underneath in blue felt tip.

She shook her head, and laughed. Looking up, she could see the vags on the Row, approaching Marlowe, asking him questions and staring at her.

She placed the card in her pocket, then went back to the carts. The talking stopped as she began to separate the carts' contents. The books, some of the cooking equipment and food, the stereo and gardening equipment and her clothes she put in one cart. The rest she put in the other.

Marlowe looked at her and the carts. He took the gas stove from beneath the one she was giving him, and placed it with her things. Then he looked at the vags, and squeezed her shoulder.

He was making it clear what was hers, and what was his. And that she should get home without being hassled.

He told the vags to start a line. And as she watched those who'd missed the last F.C.D. meal run toward the Row, Pecola took a pear from one of her bags, and began to eat.



Like most writers, Gordon Gross is two people. But unlike most writers, Gordon Gross is literally two people: husband and wife writing team Eve Gordon and Harold Gross. "Communion" is their first story sale.

They currently earn their living in the computer field as consultants and troubleshooters. Harold is a professional actor and Eve does stand-up comedy. They live in a New York City apartment too small for them, their two cats, and their collection of 2,000 books.

Communion

By Gordon Gross

MON (MIDDLE OF NOWHERE) spins slowly on our view screen. After four and a half years together in *Stardust*, we are finally here. I glance at Glim,

seated in the second navnet he had jury-rigged before we left Zehabus, watching the view screen. (An odd word, jury-rigged; as if anyone could "rig" a jury.)

I feel the warm wisp of Glim's Telen disturb my mental wandering.

And they said it couldn't be done, is his thought, so easy in my mind that it could be my own. He continues to watch the view screen, solemn and straight-faced on the outside. All this time tripping over each other physically and mentally, and his humor still takes me by surprise.

I smile, the corners of my mouth resisting my attempt at seriousness. My eyes widen in a telepath's shrug.

Who knew? is my reply.

Glim turns his head slowly to look at me. *We did.*

Yes, we did, I think to myself, and here we are, still mentally sound. You *ready to go in?* I ask.

He glances at the view screen again, then leans over and touches my cheek. Our minds slide together and intertwine with the caress. *Let's get it over with*, he replies. I wonder, will we be able to enjoy the physical ease with each other that we've become accustomed to on the voyage? Or will the telepath taboos be too strong here? [Gods, life was easier as a navigator.] Who would ever have thought that just holding hands could be so important? Glim leans back in his chair, and our minds slide apart as two seas separated by a rising island.

"*Stardust* to MON," I hail the controller. Glim's daily voice exercises may not have improved the raspy quality of my voice, but they ensure that my vocal cords do not weaken and atrophy over long voyages.

"MON, Mooney here," comes the answer.

"Request permission to land."

"Do you have your Trans-immigration request?"

I transmit our files to his system.

"Residence petition, Institute ratings, and immunology records seem in order," Mooney's voice comes over the com after a few moments. "You are on manual approach. No fancy CyberNav equip here." No questions as to why there are two of us in a one-person scout. Or why telepaths would arrive without the pomp and circumstance of a full cruiser-class cybership. Perhaps our reputation precedes us?

"Affirmative, not a problem," I reply. "Give me the coords."

The computer blinks as it receives the data and vectors. A course appears in a luminescent web superimposed over MON on the view screen.

"Coming in now, half blast," I tell him.

"Confirmed. See you on the ground."

The landing goes relatively smoothly (read: I didn't blow us up); after all, I was a navigator before my Great, if late, Discovery. We touch down a bit on the heavy side, though. Glim shoots a sidelong smile at me.

It's been better than seven years since I've had to land anything besides you, I say. And any respectable planet has at least rudimentary CyberNav. Did I say anything?

You were thinking it, Glim.

I just thought you were making sure I was awake.

I power down the control chairs' gravity nets, and we make our way to the hatch. Glim looks cool and unruffled, the Diplomat training a warrior of his blood and rank receives holding him in good stead. I could use a shower

and a change of clothes after my adequate yet less than delicate landing, but there is no time. I enter the code sequence into the remote panel to the left of the hatch; the hatch slides open.

A tickle of cool Telen in my mind, and a breath of air from the planet washes over us; the hair on the back of my neck prickles as if I am charged with electricity. Outside I see the ground crew pushing a wheeled ramp out of the Control Complex over the glassine landing surface to us.

I guess we won't have to jump, I say.

Be nice, is Glim's response. *We knew they were small. Remember, that's why we came.*

I know, I say, but small doesn't always mean primitive. A beat. *Don't even think it, I say,* looking up at him cutting short a stream of visual puns.

Watching the cloud's reflections in the complex windows, I reach out instinctively for Glim's hand, but my fingers close on air. A glance in his direction; his eyes hold a sad smile. I begin to brood over our emigration to this place and our quest for a place where we can openly acknowledge our relationship. Without censure. After four and a half years shut in the *Stardust*, I can't go back to hiding my feelings for Glim. But here we are in the middle of nowhere, the restrictions of the real world slamming back into place, and I must. At least until we know that we'll be welcomed — as we are.

The ramp connects with the side of the *Stardust* with a thud bringing me back to real time. We descend, Glim one step in front of me, making up for some of our height difference. Five colonists have come out of the Complex and stand at the bottom of the ramp, waiting for us.

I savor each step. After only calisthenics in gravity fields on the *Stardust*, real forward motion seems a luxury. At the bottom we face the welcoming party, three women, one man wearing an eco-mask, and a Calcedorn. The ground crew disappears back into the Complex. Unexpectedly, the Telen twists sharply in my mind and then withdraws.

"Well come," says the youngest of the three women. Youth is relative, though. She is taller than I, but shorter than Glim, dark hair threaded with gray. "I'm Madrin, Colony Regent and Telepist."

"Well met," responds Glim, bowing slightly, palms open at his side in the traditional telepath greeting, his trained voice buoying out in rich waves. "I am Glimmer, and this is Jude."

"Well met." I make a gravelly echo of Glim and mirror the distant

handshake society has imposed on telepaths out of superstition and ignorance that we telepaths have adopted out of fear and habit. As if telepaths are so many batteries that can be linked via a handshake and used to control others. As if we would ever want to. As if we could link up without a Monitor anyway. I feel the odd Telen again. It does not feel like it comes from those standing in front of us. I resist the impulse to look over my shoulder.

Madrin smiles widely, revealing straight, white, pointed teeth. Not fully human, I note to myself, at least part Cenavish. "We are happy to have you here," she says. "We finally have enough telepaths for a proper jury."

"Not that we have a crime problem," says one of the other women, sharply.

"Of course, we don't," soothes the third. "But with six jurors, MON can file for full emerging planetary status now."

"Our other telepaths," says Madrin, a sweep of her arm taking in the four by her side. "This is Elleen," she says, indicating the woman who qualified MON's crime rate, and then, gesturing toward the other woman, "and her twin Serba."

A close look at the two women reveals Kin blood. Both share the peach-colored skin and translucent hair, robbed by age of its golden hue. They are dressed differently, Elleen in an elegant blue jump suit that would look better on a younger person, Serba in a white shirt and drab olive pants.

"Twins," I say, stunned.

Serba smiles warmly. "Not something you see every day," she says.

"No," I respond. Perhaps, I think to myself, we will fit in here.

"And this is Homar," says Madrin, nodding toward the Calcedorn. (Never point at a Calcedorn, my mother always said.)

"Eemonchdad," he greets us, and bows slightly. He is taller than Glim, his robe only barely revealing his thin sharp form beneath. Most speculations are of exoskeletons. But few Calcedorns have revealed anything more than their robed form, an occasional eye-stalk and one rumored, though suspect, case of an articulated claw. What could we learn if he opens his mind?

We obviously aren't alone here in our search for solitude and acceptance.

"Habnidad," Glim and I say in unison, returning the bow.

Telepathy is a yoke I bear not lightly, he says. His mind voice is heavy and harsh, discomfoting to feel. Undemeath it, around it, behind it, I still feel the touch of the other like a cool draft beneath a door.

That is understandable, responds Glim.

"And the last of our telepaths is Eckart," says Madrin, waving in the direction of the masked man in her party. His skin is a patchwork of light-colored blotches on a swarthy background. I do not recognize his race.

"How are you?" he asks, the mask adding a congested quality to his voice.

"Fine, thank you," I say.

"Glad to have you," he says.

"Let us show you our colony," says Madrin, gesturing off to a small transport. It is an old model ZPR, but I resist comment. We came to be out of the mainstream, I had better start accepting all that that decision implies.

"We would be honored," bows Glim, ever the diplomat.

IN THE ZIPPER, Elleen stands to the fore and stares at Glim who sits in the bucket of the craft with Madrin. I don't blame her for staring. Glim is a perfect blend of his mixed blood. The Japanese is reflected in the cast of his dark eyes and in his long straight, blue-black hair. He has the height and the fine build of his Zehabi mother. And his skin is flawlessly Kin.

Elleen has difficulty sometimes resigning herself to our age and circumstance, says Serba, coming to stand next to me at a side port. Her mind voice is feather light, a bright trill in my mind.

Excuse me? I say.

Being twins, she explains, makes it painful for us to be too far apart physically. Also we suffer from agapoma. Meaning we do not age normally, but at an accelerated rate.

I'm sorry, I say. How old are you?

Sixteen Kin Standard, she says. Going on thirty-two. And you?

Thirty-one Earth Standard.

That would make us contemporaries, at least for a short time, she laughs crinkling her eyes, and then sensing my discomfort, We are thirty-four Earth Standard. A beat. Unlike Elleen, I accept our age. There is nothing I can do about it. Unfortunately for Elleen, however, intellectual age is not accelerated. She sometimes is quite juvenile. Another beat. I, on the other hand, am always juvenile. I find it is best to remain young at heart, especially when one's heart is no longer young.

Are you full Kin then? I ask. I had heard that...Kin could not... were not...

Such delicacy, she says. It's true. Monitors born to our race dwindle to the point of extinction. Few Kin can stand to mate with our own kind.

Then how? I ask.

How did you and Glimmer share a scout for four and a half years? she asks in riposte. I shrug, looking away from her and out the portal next to me, not yet wanting to broach that particular subject and possible rejection.

"Look," says Serba aloud, pointing below the zipper. "There is the Pool."

Beneath us, a body of water lies nestled in the countryside. Its silvery surface only slightly rippled by the children and adults playing around its edges. Two zippers equally as aged as this one rest in a cleared area. The window of the zipper reflects our faces over the picnic scenes below. Mine, basic black, straight from Mohan, Earth's first colony, next to Serba's flawless peach. If I have any Kin blood in me, which obviously I must, its color is lost in the darkness of my skin. Although I have the coloring and some Mohanish features — broad nose, wide lips, kinky hair — I am too thin to be considered attractive by Mohanish standards. I do not have the wide hips and big breasts so celebrated in our literature and media. Looking at Serba, I see my build could have come to me with the telepathy in the elusive blood of the Kin. I do not know.

"The 'Pool'?"

"It seems to be some sort of gateway to the Ellysians," she says.

"Gateway? I thought the Ellysians were either long dead or visitors long gone from MON. Weren't they only survived by a handful of artifacts, not even any buildings?" I turn my head to look back at the Pool and see a flash of orange and black and white. Fluid for a moment. Then it's gone.

"True. Personally, I think they were this planet's aborigines, not simply explorers, but that they now live a strictly spiritual existence. An existence we can contact through the Pool."

"Oh please," Elleen jumps in. "Don't start that mystic Cranterism. The Pool simply induces some form of narco-pathic response in telepaths. It's probably what destroyed the Ellysians in the first place."

Madrin intercedes as Serba blushes purple at her sister. "There isn't much for a telepath to do here," she says, pointedly eyeing the twins, "except discuss some of our planet's more interesting aspects. I hope that Glimmer and you will join us in such mental acrobatics."

"Acrobatics of any sort would be welcome after so long traveling in a scout," Glim chimes in, quickly ending the conversation with a well-placed banality that requires no response.

"Glim has had Diplomat training," I offer Serba after a bit and after Elleen settles back into her hungry stare. Damn Glim if he isn't quietly reveling in it.

"Good," she responds. "And you?"

"No, I was a navigator before Discovery."

"A navigator?"

"I was twenty-two before the telepathy exhibited itself."

"A PAT-Ey. They say the late ones are the strongest," she says. I shrug my shoulders, suppressing a shudder at the old moniker. Post-Adolescent Telepathic Emergence. It was amazing how even telepaths can be so cruel in a school environment. I was a PAT-E cake, the men Beef PAT-Es. The teasing I took in the high school showers was preferable even when it became apparent that my breasts and hips would never achieve the Mohanish ideal. Children can be forgiven, but even the weakest Tel-child knows when they are hurting someone. "How did you meet Glimmer?"

"At the beginning of my second year as a juror," I say. "On Zehabus, Halbus II sector. It was a slander suit. It took forty-two days to decide the case."

"Forty-two days?" Serba echoes incredulously.

"The plaintiff was very...unlikable," I explain.

"And you say Glimmer is the one who has Diplomat training?"

"The trial proved to be a learning experience," I reply. Most of my cases until that point had been violent crimes, ones where opinion and perception played an inconsequential role.

"So how did the two of you survive your voyage without killing each other?"

I look away from her again. Glim is in deep conversation with Madrin. When I face Serba again, she is still watching me.

How is it possible for you and Elleen to be full Kin if your Monitors are extinct? I try to head off the questions about Glim and me. Have you perfected disrupter fields?

Diplomacy forgotten, she takes the direct route, she laughs. Our Monitors are rare, not extinct. And disrupters are not yet...effective for the

Kin despite the hope that they would be. But that is of no consequence. My father is static. You would say, non-telepathic. A well-adjusted man, despite his handicap. A Monitor wasn't necessary to protect my parents during, uh, physical contact.

Oh. I can think of no other response. Monitors are an important part of most telepaths' lives. They can dampen or amplify other telepaths' abilities, weave together several telepaths' abilities, or even break into a shielded mind, should it be necessary.

What does a race do if it can no longer touch? As long as the sentient universe has been aware of the Kin, the race's population, though extraordinarily long-lived, has been dwindling. Non-related Kin can barely stand in the same room together, their aversion to physical contact with their own kind is legendary.

Telepaths of other races avoid physical contact with each other for more concrete reasons. Glim and I are the only case I know of where simple telepaths don't go mad or into psychic shock when they meld without benefit of a Monitor. Non-Kin races won't die out like the Kin anytime soon, though. The "static" population makes up the majority of the universe, for the time being, at least. *What about the Calcedorn?*

Homar? she asks. *It may be Kin blood. At the look in my eyes, she crinkles her own and continues, Not like that. Two or three centuries ago the Calcedorns were playing with genetic engineering. They asked for Kin samples. It could be that or their race could be starting to spontaneously produce its own telepaths. I haven't heard of any besides Homar though.*

Eckart, she continues without any prompting from me, is actually from Earth.

Earth? I echo, shocked.

It's not impossible to get to Earth, Serba says, although the xenophobia does make it...trying.

"Trying?" I say.

She smiles. *Okay, dangerous for an alien. Although a Kin can pass. It's clear that Eckart's got Kin blood as well as Earth blood, but it's caused his skin discoloration as well as some other over-sensitivities to the environment. Bluntly, it's not something he can easily hide on Earth. I suppose it was easier to leave than stay.*

Is that why you and Elleen are here?

We are all misfits here of one sort or another. What about you and Glimmer? What brings you to our backwater?

The usual reasons, I say.

The usual reasons, my foot, she replies. Please, I may be a genetic abomination, but that doesn't make me an idiot. The odds of two non-Tels surviving that long together on a scout are astronomical; the odds of two telepaths doing it are incalculable.

I do not respond, but I can see the momentary glint of — what? comprehension, disapproval, revulsion? Then it is hidden. Serba appears to be an accomplished diplomat herself.

I turn to watch Madrin refereeing a match of mind wrestling between Glim and Eckart. Ah, the smell of testosterone is in the air, and Elleen is breathing deeply. I don't like her sniffing at Glim like he's a cake in a bakery.

Glim shouts out "Three five nine." By the look on Eckart's face I can guess that Glim had successfully gotten the number out from behind his shield. Madrin awards Glim the point. It brings back memories of training.

I was serving as Assistant Navigator on the VanderTol, a luxury goods frigate, the first year of my second three-year contract. Very soon after I made the Great Discovery ("Captain, I think I'm telepathic"), I was dropped at the Institute on Zehabus, not because it was the best, although it was, but because it was the next stop on the ship's route.

I was officially Tested and officially Confirmed. My career as a navigator was legally terminated, my contract paid off by the Institute, and my life as a telepath begun.

The course work was straightforward. Learn to control your mind. Shield against unwanted "noise"; keep your thoughts to yourself. Weeks of moot court. Memorize the rules.

Telepaths must spend no less than four, but no more than twenty years serving as jurors, travel time not included, in a Court certified by the Interplanetary Department of Justice. Of course, the alternative was permanent observation and control by the IDJ in a location convenient for them, generally in one of their detention centers.

Three months after Discovery, I was a juror.

The zipper, having left the Pool behind, flies over the main colony. It is a small one. Four buildings clustered around a village green are all that is visible from the zipper.

"Most of the colony is beneath the green," Serba explains.

"Didn't they learn from Earth that people weren't meant to live underground?"

"They don't stay there," she replies. "There are crops to be cared for and business to attend to, not to mention all the festivals and holiday celebrations that take place on the green."

"Farming?" I ask.

"Yes," she responds, "the fields are over there. The colony actually extends under the more delicate crops so that the radiated heat will protect them at night." She points to the other side of the zipper. Through the window, I can make out the patchwork of distant fields and one above-ground building. "Livestock is kept on the other side of the fields. It cuts down on the smell."

A small way from the main colony, perhaps a thirty-minute walk, is the Justice building, an elegant name for a simple one-story granite structure and the central body of authority on MON. From here, blocked only by a thin line of trees, I see the few above-ground colony structures and the beginning of the fields. The oh-so-mysterious Pool that sparked Elleen and Serba is a shimmer in the distance. Further yet, and getting farther behind every moment, is what has been home for the last four plus years. Madrin lands the zipper on the pad next to the building. I feel just a bit exposed standing beside the zipper. Getting inside will be welcome.

We walk toward the oversized doors, oddly ornate in contrast with the plain facade. Eckart walks up to pace with me. "What do you think?"

"They're intriguing." I momentarily halt my rush toward the safety of the building to study them more closely. "I recognize many of the symbols and stories, but not all. They're very well carved." Eckart smiles and starts inside the building.

"You just made his day. They were his project," Madrin whispers to me as she passes into the building. I suppose being stuck inside so often gave Eckart time to pursue other talents. With a final appreciative glance I enter the sheltering walls of the Justice building.

Inside of the structure in the back, there is bench seating for witnesses and spectators. At the front are the Judge's and Jury's boxes. Facing the J's are the boxes for plaintiff and defendant. All is simply wrought; the structure seems cool without being cold. The piercing gaze of Lady Justice presides over the room from behind the Judge's box.

"You'll be spending little of your time here," starts Madrin, "but it is the center of MON Justice. We also house the Ellysian artifacts here — what few we have. More immediately, though, I am sure you wish to rest. Out this way are the Telepath cottages." She starts out of the hall and leads us to a back door that is far less impressive than where we entered.

The clean air of MON wraps me again. For a moment the odd Telen tickles my mind. I turn to Glim but he is not sending to me, and no one else is being obvious about it. My shield may be a bit weak; after all Glim and I didn't need to use shields all that much over the last four years. In the distance is a copse of orange-leaved trees striking against the turquoise sky. We start toward them, the rest of the Tels allowing Glim and me a chance to absorb the scenery.

The housing for the telepaths is another twenty-minute walk beyond the Justice building just the other side of the trees. At present, there are six above-ground cottages, a powerful example of the separate but equal treatment that telepaths often receive at the hands of non-Tels. Each is positioned to afford privacy, but all within sight of each other.

Madrin goes with Glim, and Serba escorts me to my cottage. Perhaps Serba is not the only one who is unaware of our reputation.

Serba, I send.

Yes?

Why are the telepaths housed aboveground if the non-Tel population is housed below it? I ask.

We would have little reason to come aboveground otherwise, she replies. Elleen was right in her statement that crime is no problem here.

Oh, I say, not convinced, but it's a better party line than I've heard in the past.

My cottage is cozy although the jurors I worked with on Zehabus would have called it crowded. The structure is made of a material that I am sure is not indigenous to MON, but is made to look like natural wood and mud. A cotton batting mattress in the bedroom on a platform bed, a small kitchen complete with foodporter, a bath area with a huge sunken bath, a living area with a small fireplace, a compact workspace with Plex-Link®. Not bad for a start-up colony.

Glim comes to me after Serba leaves.

At least there's indoor plumbing, I say.

You are incorrigible, he says, the feel of his Telen warming me. So little time apart and I have missed our contact already.

I was trained to expect technology, I remind him.

As I was raised to expect luxury, he replies.

Touché.

Did you see the Pool?

Yes. Serba says she thinks it's a gateway to the Ellysians. Elleen, however, disagrees.

I seem to recall. Madrin didn't volunteer an opinion.

Serba says she thinks that they are the planet's aborigines.

Interesting, says Glim. Then, *Madrin says that the crew will off-load our belongings and revive Tikki from stasis. They should bring our things by later today.* The thought of Tikki, my gen-cat, back underfoot brings a smile to my face.

Why don't you get a shower in the meantime, Glim says. He knows me too well.

I'll do that.

Come by when you're done, he says. *Perhaps I can give you reason for another one.*



BATH, A REAL BATH in real water, the first in too many years, is the first genuine straightforward pleasure for me on MON. I rub in lotion and let the air dry the excess moisture off me. The light floral scent of the lotion is unusual, most likely indigenous, definitely new, to me. Looking in the full-length mirror in the bathing area, I see that regular exercise has helped me keep my shape (thin), but more than four years without sun has not lightened the color of my skin. The even ebony glistens darkly with oil and water in the slightly bluer light of MON's unfamiliar sun.

There is a brightly colored cotton-like robe hanging in the closet of the sleeping area. I put it on when my skin is dry and walk barefoot toward Glim's cottage. The ground is soft and slightly damp against the soles of my feet. The grass is a dark blue-green, and it's dotted with small turquoise flowers.

Out under the sky, that cool whip of Telen flutters again. It seems to come from the direction of the main colony, but when I turn to look in that direction, the touch shifts. I concentrate, listening carefully, but I can discern no meaning, just a slight pull, a caress, a whisper, a kiss. Either someone

skilled is playing this game or I am losing my touch. Normally I can immediately sense direction from a touch. I close my eyes and try to focus on that slender cool thread of thought, try to resolve its meaning and direction.

While I am circling slowly, trying to get a fix on the mind touch, Glim comes up behind me.

Do you feel it? I ask.

Yes.

Where is it coming from? I ask, turning to face him.

He shrugs.

What is it saying? Can you understand it?

No, he says.

Do they have a Monitor here? I ask.

No, he replies. *According to Madrin, they haven't been able to afford that status.*

Then what is it? I ask.

Glim shakes his head. *I don't know.*

What does it mean?

I don't know, Jude. That's all I can say. He pounds that last thought into my mind with a bit more fervor than necessary.

Okay, I apologize. Sorry. I reach down and pick one of the tiny blue flowers. The scent is sweet like a Mohanish apricot. I hold it up for Glim to smell.

Nice, he says, noncommittal. I can tell the unidentified Telen is irritating him. Young Monitors often play this sort of game, a sort of mental ventriloquism, before they mature and are trained. Maybe MON has birthed its own Monitor.

If mental arts are not wholly welcome here, a child could learn to hide its gift for quite some time. This is true especially if the parents are aware and helping with the deceit. While such deceit is a crime, few can blame parents for not wanting to send their children away at so young an age.

Cueing from Glim's tension, I decide to occupy him rather than pursue the source of the Telen. *This place reminds me of Mohan, I say. Of course, Mohan has a lot more people. And they're all dark.*

Not to mention that they have CyberNav equipment, Glim chips in.

I wasn't actually going to mention it, I say. Glim studiously offers no response. *I have to admit, it is beautiful here. And they certainly went out of their way to provide telepaths with privacy.* Glim nods. *Don't you like it?*

It's different, he answers.

Different? I say.

Kelgar is a desert planet, he reminds me.

I forgot. I've never seen his home planet; as much as I try, I cannot picture an entire planet that is a desert. Only the very rich would choose to live on such a planet. Kelgar is so exclusive, so sparsely populated, that it doesn't even have its own Court, but shares one of Zehabus'. It is a constant source of teasing that he never learned how to swim. Maybe now I will have the time to make good on my threat to teach him. The Pool seems a perfect place to try. I, of course, will then have to get over my fear of stepping on living, green, slimy things in natural ponds. Maybe there is an indoor pool somewhere.

How is your cottage, I ask after a while.

The same as yours, he replies.

Is there a damper? I ask. I didn't think to check my place.

Yes. And I see a little fire light up behind his eyes. The switch is by the bed.

Ooo, I say. Let's go try it out.

Why is it that when we touch, we do not go insane except with pleasure, neither of us is subsumed by the personality of the other, and our minds like our bodies fit together with the ease of two puzzle pieces? Why don't the telepists know how to do this?

It's a good thing we had a 'lectro-Monitor or you would have deafened half the colony, I jibe Glim. Of course the scratches on his back and ass didn't appear quietly either.

It was certainly interesting to have room to move around in again. Though I can't say much for the constraints of gravity. I'll be sore for days.

So will I, but I'm not complaining, I tease him, grabbing his now flaccid penis. But I better get back to my cottage before we get caught. Don't want to risk alienating ourselves in the first few hours.

You don't think they'd buy the fact that you were just giving me a massage? I send him a few choice images of what I can massage for him and how before he groans and begs exhaustion. Okay, you're right, Jude. I just don't want to lose what we had on the ship. I can't go back to hiding all the time.

Another evening like this and I don't think we'll have a choice. We really do have to remember we have neighbors now! I slip out of our wet embrace

and put on the robe. Glim turns off the damper field, and we are thrown into shadowy dusk as the field's soft yellow glow fades. "I think I'll go enjoy another bath before dinner. You may want to as well. I don't mind the aroma, but I wouldn't want to send any nosy females into rut."

"And to whom would you be referring?"

"As if you didn't notice Elleen on the zipper. Or was that Elleen noticing your zipper? You, with your archaic throwback fashions."

"A bit territorial, aren't we? Now why would I give up what we have for just some simple Kin-ship?"

I fall back to the bed, laughing at his abysmal pun. It is difficult to get used to being around people again. The *Stardust* was a closed but complete society. A community of two. And we still have an infinite amount of space to explore in each other's minds.

Serba understated the situation when she said there isn't a lot for a telepath to do on MON. It's no wonder Eckart had time to work on his magnificent doors. Three days. I am unpacked, well fed, and over rested. Tikki, when she is not off ridding the planet of small game, is busy running under my feet. And the wild Telen never seems totally absent from my mind unless I'm in a damping field. I cannot otherwise shield against it.

It may be growing stronger, but it sends no message that I can decipher. Several times I have found myself walking toward the main colony, unthinkingly, and have stopped myself. The compulsion makes me nervous.

Glim seems similarly affected. Madrin says the others felt the same touch for a time after they first arrived and then less and less frequently until it disappeared altogether. Apparently this is the source of the controversy with the Pool. There are many documented phenomena that can cause false Telen, but none ever documented as consistently as this without a satisfactory explanation. Unfortunately, since MON really is in the middle of nowhere (in a physical sense), the phenomenon hasn't been vigorously pursued after the original, inconclusive, investigation dead-ended several years ago.

Glim is drilling the nervousness out of his system with his broadsword in the open area just beyond cottages. The only sounds are his occasional grunts and the elusive avian life of MON which Tikki keeps at bay. I need some distraction as well. Glim can't possibly occupy me all the time. Not that

we haven't tried. While there have been some "contact" events at the Pool arranged by Serba, we have politely declined to join for the time being. Though it might give me an excuse to get Glim near an open body of water at least, I'm not quite up to swimming lessons myself yet.

So far, no one has said anything to us about the time Glim and I spend together, and I assume that the damper keeps the full nature of our relationship solely between the two of us, but one never knows. It's better not to push too far too soon.

Serba, I call out.

You rang, comes her reply.

What is there to do?

Nothing, she says. Elleen is in a snit —

Am not — echoes Elleen's grating Telen.

Homar is molting and can't go out, and Eckart's got a problem with the pollen. So we don't have any contact plans.

You can't tell me that there's nothing to do, I protest.

Harvest, she says. That's it.

Can I help?

You don't have to, she says.

I want to. My belly-button has been over-contemplated.

What?

Sorry. An old philosophy joke. I'm bored.

Okay. I can call Madrin. Maybe, I'll join you.

Thank you.

I put on a loose-fitting wearall and boots while I wait for Serba. I rinse my mouth with water. I splash cold water on my face, and sit outside and let the sun dry it.

Madrin will send a zipper as soon as one is available.

Thank you, Serba. It just seems that there should be more to do on a planet. I expected to be bored on Stardust, but here...

You'll adjust. Serba comes around the corner. "Do you mind if we talk?"

"No. Something wrong?"

"I just don't want Elleen to overhear us. Another drawback to being twins is that it is very hard to close the other out of our thoughts when speaking telepathically. If we used the 'lectro-Mon she would feel the wall like a headache. This is the most...diplomatic way to handle it." The smile while she simultaneously crosses her eyes is not convincing.

"Is there a problem between you two?"

"Not between us really. I know you noticed her fascination with Glim as I did. Remember, I told you she is young in mind if not in body. I think your relationship with Glim has her a bit jealous. Even if she knows she couldn't handle any physical contact. Somehow she thinks if you can, she must be able to."

"Relationship?" Trying to play dumb as a telepath requires infinitely more finesse than as a non-Tel. It is also incredibly foolish with your peers. "Is it that obvious?"

"The facts are, but the explanation isn't. How do you two survive...it? I mean, with a Monitor it is usually doable, in a rather public sort of way for your species, but without...How do you protect each other?"

"We don't. We just let it happen."

"You allow each other in completely? Without any protection? Without even a disrupter?"

"Yes." It is the truth between Glim and me. Absolutely no barriers when we are in contact.

"What..."

"What is it like?"

"Well, yes. I mean, I know it's none of my business, but...yes."

I start to laugh and Tikki tries to jump on my lap, knocking me to the ground in the process. Soon she and I are one large mass of sentient protein. Out of breath, I finally pin Tikki by her shoulders and she playfully concedes defeat by throwing her paws out over her head. She opens her mouth and lolls her tongue out to one side.

"That felt so good."

"Nothing like a good wrestle," Serba stands up and gestures toward the Justice building. I let Tikki go, and walk with Serba, the gen-cat bounding in wide circles about us. "Where did you get such a wonderful gen-cat?"

"She was a gift from my parents. I think they were worried I would be alone the rest of my life after I...after I was Discovered. It must have cost them a year's salary. I guess they felt guilty for birthing me."

"That's awful."

"I don't mean it that way. I don't blame them. I'm actually proud of who and what I am even if it came with little choice. But I think they have their doubts. Anyway, that's not what I meant. I meant it felt good to talk about

Glim and me. And I don't mind you asking. I haven't been able to talk to anyone about it ever. Before we left Zehabus, we were rather avoided. Even my best friends wouldn't talk about it. I think the Institute suggested the transfer to MON just to keep things calm."

"So?"

"So? Oh, what's it like? It's like, well, taking a warm bath that hugs back. It flows through you and fills you. It's like you've turned inside out and you're both part of this incredible organism that's both of us individually but also something wonderfully more. It's...indescribable. Here," I send her the imagery and emotion that flood me every time Glim and I make love. It isn't perfect; it doesn't even come close to the ever-changing wonderment that Glim and I share, but it leaves Serba stunned and blushing.


"For something you can't share, you've certainly ripped back the curtain."

"So, what do you tell Elleen?"

"The truth, as if I had a choice. I just hope she lets it go. What you and Glim have sounds...unmatchable. At least once you get past the concept of two Tels touching, especially in that way. I wonder what makes you two so different?"

"I have no idea, I'm only glad we are."

The zipper pulls up and we board in silent camaraderie. Watching Serba's back as she walks up the entry, I smile.

UTSIDE, THE SUN is shining, but the temperature is still pleasant in the shade. I sit down on the bench beside my front door. After a short time (doesn't anyone keep track of time on this planet?), I stand up and scan the sky. No zipper. I am looking forward to being in the fields again today. The work is satisfying and, besides, there isn't a whole lot else to do. Especially since I need to leave Glim a little recovery time.

The few MONEans I've met are pleasant but reserved around me. Whether it's my newness or my Tel status that holds them at bay I cannot yet say. No one is hostile though in thought or deed. Even a non-Tel can pick up strong emotions, observation being a large part of anyone's ability to understand those around them. Tels just have the capacity to confirm and get detail.

Tikki comes trotting up from the field and insinuates herself between my feet.

A light breeze whistles over my cottage, and I hum along with it tunelessly. I take one step toward Glim's cottage, and immediately trip over Tikki, who jumps on me, purring, as soon as I'm on the ground. I wrestle her off me and get up, heading for Glim's place, keeping an ear open for the zipper as I go. The grass brushing against my boots as I walk and Tikki's purr are all I allow to announce my approach and possible ambush.

When I am nearly all the way to Glim's place, I can hear the cut of his broadsword through the air, his voice counting. I walk around his cottage and see him before he senses me and turns. He is covered with sweat, wearing only a pair of shorts. I smile. Tikki storms him, sword play being one of her favorite games, but he throws the sword down before she reaches him. Tikki goes and sits by the sword, attention divided between it and Glim.

I thought you were going to help with the harvest, he says, ignoring Tikki.

If the zipper ever comes.

Always so impatient, he says.

It comes from years of having to be someplace on schedule, I respond. *You're just used to letting everything take forever.*

Jurors learn that everything happens in its own time.

I send him a mental raspberry. *You've only been a juror for five point two six years longer than I have, Earth-standard at that. Your problem is you've got too much money.*

Not anymore, he reminds me. How he can be so — mild — about it still dumbfounds me.

Are you sure it was worth giving up? I ask.

What we have together is worth any price, he responds, walking toward me. *I only wish we could live without having to hide it out here on the edge of the universe. There are places I would love to share with you.*

But any place I am with you is perfect. I smile up at him.

Glim cups my face in his hands for the first time since we've landed without the numbing edges of a damper field around us, and time seems to shift and blur. I smell his sweat mingled with the MONEan flowers in an impressionistic symphony. Our minds surf together in a wave, and I open my lips to kiss him ... the world explodes in an orange and black and white flash of light and the screaming and I see them floating in the black and orange — two of them, they must be the Ellysians, I think — long hair floating behind

them, androgynous in form and Glim's mind and mine embrace and I can feel the power in the joining grow and I feel the others, Serba and Elleen and Eckart and Homar, trying to separate us with their minds and flinching from the assault and I see MON through a black veil and — how can the spiritual bond between Glim and me be this strong? What has happened? Why has it not happened before? How could I ever give this up? How could anyone ask me to deny it? — then Tikki is between my feet and I am falling, and Glim tries to hold me but Tikki is between us, he loses touch, and the bond is broken.

I fall on my back, jamming my shoulder, and Tikki jumps on me, purring and rubbing her face against my chin. The colors are gone. The screaming has stopped.

What in the living hell was that? Serba demands.

I look up at Glim. He is staring at his hands.

The others are coming, I say. *Are you all right?*

He looks up from his hands. *Are you all right?* I ask again.

What happened? he asks. His question sparkles in my mind with shock and wonder.

I shake my head. *I don't know. Are you okay?*

It was so powerful, he says. *Like we were fusing into one —*

Are you okay? I shoot at him, worrying about personality subsumption.

Yes, he says, finally. *Not subsumption. Mind sex.*

I can see the others, the Calcedorn in the lead, coming around the corner of Glim's cottage. Tikki settles down on my chest with her paws snuggled into my neck, the tips of her claws prickling against the surface of my skin.

"What happened?" demands Serba, stopping several feet from me. The others stand a little way from her. No one moves to help me shake off Tikki. I wrestle Tikki off and slowly stand up. No one attempts to help me at all.

"What happened?" Serba repeats.

"I don't know," I say. "Everything was black and orange, and they were floating."

I turn toward the main colony and sense that Glim follows my gaze.

"The Ellysians," she says. "You saw the Ellysians. But how could you see them here? We've only seen them at the Pool."

"You never told me you'd seen them before."

"I didn't want to influence you. If Elleen and the scientists are right, and it is simply a 'narco-pathic response to elements unknown,' I could influence your perceptions by giving you expectations."

I feel as if the blood has been drained from my body. Glim may be right. Although the term doesn't describe the experience itself, "mind sex" is the best description the feeling left in its wake. "You could never have suggested what we just saw and felt."

"Never," Glim chimes in. His nipples are still hard from the experience, his body flushed. He sits down quickly, knees drawn up in an effort to hide his excitement.

Serba, however, is too intent on me to notice or care. "What did you see?" Her level of passion is almost fanatical.

"I, we, saw two beings. I didn't get a sense of male or female. They had long hair of some sort that appeared to have motion or they were in some kind of nul-grav field. There were colors: black and orange. A sense of...of...welcome? Is that what you would call it, Glim?"

"I didn't *feel* anything. I saw what you saw, but we share all our senses when we're joined, uh, linked mentally."

Glim is actually flustered. I have never seen him off balance before.

"Your 'link' was most extraordinary," Homar interjects. His molting must not be finished; a fine trail of particles marks the path from his cottage. I find myself musing again over the nature of his physical being. "Is this what you two normally experience during your mating process?"

Thus Homar brings Glim's and my relationship to the table, albeit in a less than tactful manner. Glim, all sign of embarrassment gone, stands to confront Homar. "I don't believe we have invited you into our hive."

Homar goes rigid for a moment, the insult stunning him. "Actually," he answers, calmly precise, "as you have already shared your feast, we are no longer strangers on the path to your hive."

Glim finally bows in assent and responds, "Andadmonee, Sic Homar, then allow me to show you the proper entry."

"You know my people's customs well, Glimmer. But know, too, that what has happened here today is extraordinary; so much so that it draws me out at a time when no other, certainly no other of an alien race, may expect to see me. That being said, let us end our sparring. I think we are both vulnerable at the present moment." Homar gestures behind him, and Glim notices for the first time the trail of the airborne particles.

"Very well."

"So you both saw the same things," Eckart jumps in, promptly sneezing.

"I'm sorry, I ran out without my eco-mask."

"Didn't we just clear your sinuses for you?" I look at Eckart holding his palm over his nose. I begin to giggle.

"This is not something to laugh about!" Elleen is darkly flushed with rage. "You two blasted all of us with something you had no right to inflict."

"Calm down, Elleen," Serba cuts off her tirade with a command. "I'm sure it wasn't intentional, and I don't think it caused any damage, however shocking it may have been. Your problem is you're jealous. It's time to grow up. Worry about the welfare of the jury for once."

In the distance we hear a zipper closing in on us from the direction of the main colony. As it comes over the trees I can see Madrin's strained face in the window. *Please, all of you, I will be there in a moment. I think we need to talk, calmly, about whatever just happened.*

Glim takes this time to re-don his shirt and sheathe his sword. Simple tasks give him a sense of order and stability. On the *Stardust* he would wash every day in precisely the same way. Glim uses ritual to channel his emotions and energy.

He would never yell at me for calling up supplies from the food porter in a different order, juice before caffè, toppings before toast. Nor would he remark if I set them out on the table in a haphazard manner. He would simply reorder each into its customary place, touching an item at a time, lips murmuring quietly.

I didn't find out until the end of the voyage that the order he imposed was an integral part of the Zehabi ritual of thanksgiving. And I only found out because I asked, not because he ever called me to task for my little game of disorder.

The zipper lands, and Madrin walks over, gravely concentrating on our jury. I feel slightly bewildered and guilty like an adolescent after she first learns to masturbate.

"I think, perhaps, we should all sit. Homar," she notes the Calcedorn's unprecedented public appearance with no outward sign of shock, "are you comfortable enough to stay with us? Do you need anything in your present condition to remain here?"

"I am content at the moment. I imagine this morning's events overshadow even the occasion of my present exposure."

We follow Madrin over to a copse of MON's pervasive orangish-leafed trees. We sit in a circle with Glim and me at opposite points of a diameter. Madrin settles on a large stone. We look for all the galaxy like a troop of campers about to hear

a ghost story. "We had all heard the rumor, of course, that Jude and Glim were not only gifted telepaths, but also distinctive in their interaction with each other. But we were not warned of the effect this could have on the rest of our jury."

"Madrin," Glim answers, "this has never happened before. We do try to keep our physical contact within the constraints of a damping field, but we have touched, kissed, even been intimate on the rare occasion outside of it. In the past, neither we nor nearby telepaths have had this...reaction."

"It's the Pool," Elleen states.

"I don't know what caused it," I say. "But it was unexpected. Glim and I were ambushed as much as the rest of you."

"That being the case, I believe a certain amount of restraint would be prudent for now. Perhaps one of you is developing into a Monitor. For all our sakes, I think, for now, you two should cease all physical contact."

As Madrin pronounces her verdict, I feel my dreams shred and float away on the wind. All reason for our self-imposed exodus, all hope for the freedom to build a new life is lost. I call to Tikki and run back into my cottage. Locking the door, I draw a near-scalding bath and sink into it crying. I hear knocking at the door and feel an occasional tentative Telen, but I ignore them all and sink into my tears and mist.

I wake to a tapping at the door. My eyes are swollen, and the sunlight paints the inside of my eyelids fire-red. *Go away*, I send, putting as much bite in my Telen as I can muster.

Never, comes the answer, warm and soothing in my mind. Glim.

Jude.

I cannot answer.

Jude, please, we need to talk. I roll over onto Tikki who makes an unenthusiastic pillow; she mews her complaint at me, then wriggles out and off the bed.

Jude, I know you're awake. We need to talk. Things are not as bad as you think they are. Much has happened since you...left. Dear Glim, always the diplomat, when he isn't slicing and dicing.

I put on my robe, my damned MONEan robe, and go to the door.

"What?" I cannot continue in mind speak. It only reminds me of how close we can no longer be. I stare at the slab of wood separating us and wonder how I could even go on separated permanently from Glim. This was not what

we risked so much for. Maybe we should simply take off again in *Stardust* and cruise around until we die. For so long I never believed someone existed with whom I could share my life, from even before Discovery. How could I ever survive happily without what Glim and I have shared?

"May I come in?"

For a moment I really consider just going back to bed alone and curling into a little ball. But this is Glim. Our shared history is powerful. The ostracism of not only our fellow jurors, but of all telepaths on Zehabus. The threats of the planet's most prominent anti-Tel group, SCM, Society for Closed Minds (or SCuM as the Tels think of them). Four and a half standard years locked together in a cell called *Stardust*. The dreams of the freedom to acknowledge, publicly, our feelings for each other.

I owe him more than shutting him out, even now when those dreams are lost. With or without the dream, I love him. "Of course," I capitulate.

I lead him into the kitchen, and we sit at the small table across from each other. My eyes are gritty and my teeth fuzzy. Neither of us speaks.

Glim looks concerned and worried. I want to hold him, and my thoughts come full circle to why we're sitting here on opposite sides of the table rather than holding each other. Finally, "So, what has been decided for us now?" *And how can we fight it?*

"No, it's our decision, yours and mine. Madrin and I discussed this, rather heatedly at times, for most of the night. I don't think she realized how strongly this would affect us. The entire jury realizes, now, how much we share. But it's possible that we pose some kind of danger or at the very least some serious distraction, if this happens again. So we compromised."

"How?" I ask, wondering what we have lost.

"To begin with, no physical contact outside an enhanced 'lectro-Mon."

"Enhanced how?"

Glim opens his fist and reveals a disrupter. "I've already installed one in my cottage. This is for yours. If you agree."

"But we've never disturbed anyone when we're under a 'lectro-Mon. Why do we need the disrupter?" I protest.

"It's the least Madrin will accept." Glim shrugs. Intellectually, I can understand the condition. Disrupter fields are effective, and most damping fields are installed in the bedroom where they are convenient to privacy and intimacy, if not limiting to spontaneity.

"What else?"

"Madrin will communicate with the closest Institute to notify them that she wants to Test us. She thinks that one or both of us may be developing into Monitors. She is confident that the Institute will transmit any materials she needs.

"I have some misgivings; she may be trained as a telepist," Glim says, "but she is not a Monitor herself. I wonder if she is qualified to Test us. I guess we'll find out. I can't imagine that I'm a Monitor, though; if I gambled, my bet would be on you."

"What else?" More testing. I've spent more years in a school environment than anywhere else. First as a child, then a navigator, then a juror, now this. When shall I be free of tests?

"We work with the others on some experiments to learn more about the Ellysians." Glim smiles and spreads his palms. "That's the deal."

"You love to negotiate, don't you," I say. "It's a good thing that it's one of your talents."

"I enjoy it most when the goals are worthy. Now, how would you like to take advantage of some of my other talents?"

With Glim's gaze on me, I become aware of how rumpled I must look. "At least let me rinse my mouth first. There's no telling what life forms are thriving in there."

"Ever the delicate flower," Glim laughs. "Since you've made it so enticing, why don't you just meet me 'neath the 'lectro-Mon?"

A slow grin gets the better of me. "Deal, but I'm not responsible for the condition of your clothes if you're not out of them by the time I get there."

In the bathroom, I rinse my mouth and wash my face. I hear a click and snap as Glim inserts the disrupter into the 'lectro-Mon. Then the rustle of his clothing. My reflection stares back at me from the mirror, eyes puffy with purplish circles under them. The last time I looked this unrested was right before we left Zehabus when Glim and I received a matched set of death threats from SCuM. That was the moment that finalized our decision to come to MON.

Before I was Discovered, I had a steady life, not many highs, but certainly not many lows either. Life was an even journey.

After Discovery, the regularity of my existence was destroyed. After three months of training and therapy with multitudinous telepists, I was

thrown into the most prestigious Court system this side of the galaxy and trapped in the middle of a juridic melodrama. Murder, armed robbery, piracy, hate crimes. For the first time in my life I wondered about the depravity of sentient life.

Into this mind stepped Glim. Breeding from a long line of rich on Kelgar, he seemed to resonate in my mind even during the first case that we deliberated together. When we first broke taboo and touched fingertip-to-fingertip, the result was electric. Never before had I anything of any account to lose. But having such a thing now, especially one as taboo as our relationship, I cannot help but fear losing it. And with that fear comes the knowledge that I will pay any price to keep it.

Maybe living alone together in the *Stardust* isn't such a bad alternative. Once we rule out the possibility of sunlight, fresh air, and unconstricted movement, a diet of love seems all we could possibly need.

Glim is waiting for me when I get to the bedroom. The soft yellow glow of the 'lectro-Mon bathes him and the room around him with an ethereal light. His nearly hairless chest, solid and chiseled, seems to float above the edge of the covers.

I go to him, stiff from last night's protest, but needing his warmth and encouragement. I pass through the field, slipping out of the robe, reaching out with my Telen, and...nothing. I fall into his arms and feel my skin against his, his lips in my hair, his penis against my thigh, but I am trapped within my own mind, I cannot embrace his.

Like this, making love is just jamming.

But it's all we have left.

THE JUSTICE BUILDING is cool inside its granite cocoon. We walk through a corridor that skirts the courtroom. Serba leads the way, Madrin separates Glim and me in the line, and Elleen picks up the rear. Serba stops at a carved door. The sign simply says ARCHIVES. Understated for the only collection of Ellysian artifacts in the known universe.

Once humans joined the galactic community, they ceased their "sticky fingers" approach to archeology. Few inhabitable worlds are void of the signs of prior civilization. Humans adopted the habit of other sentient explorers; they collect artifacts into archives and museums local to their site of

discovery where such can be viewed in context. The more spectacular discoveries are connected by regular touring ships.

Scientists and others with interest in sites off the established tours can request an information dump to gain data on smaller or private sights. If the researcher requires first-hand observations, however, he or she has three choices: book passage on one of the cyberfrigates on the appropriate trade route (a long and time consuming option); charter a transport to the desired location (an expensive, but more direct option for those with no flight expertise); or take a personal scout (the most exorbitant option for those who can survive on their own in space).

The system, such as it is, does not engender much contact with remote locations like MON. When taking on such great expense, one would like to garner results somewhat in proportion to the outlay.

Serba opens the door, and we enter a dimly lit room. A sneeze draws my attention to Eckart who sits in front of a viewing screen. "Please, shut the door quickly. The pollen is rather thick today," he says in a nasally apologetic way while reaching for his trademark mask on the table next to him. "I'm doing some research for my next project — a statue for the center Green," he says by way of polite dismissal as he returns to the viewer.

On the other side of the room are several small file containers and a single display case. Inside the case, highlighted in tiny pools of spotlights, are five...things. "What could these possibly be?"

Serba looks up with a misty-eyed reverence, "We don't know. The theories range from farming handtools to pieces of larger machinery. They were all found near the banks of the Pool or within its historical shoreline."

Each piece looks as if a giant hand has twisted it into a bizarre contortion. How would the Ellysians have used them? Did they hold them in their hands? Did Ellysians have hands? Every edge is rounded, and each piece mottled in color. Were the artifacts damaged in some way by some unknown cataclysm — or were they constructed so? Nothing about their shapes suggests the images Glim and I saw.

Glim's voice breaks my concentration, "I wonder if the Ellysians were blasted out of existence? All of these pieces look like the leftovers of a plasma-blast."

Madrin fields the question. "That has been discussed among the academics. Unfortunately, geologists can't find any corroborating geologic data, so

they favor the theory that these objects are as originally designed. The next most common theory is that they were dropped here from the sky by some kind of vehicle. Unless we actually contact the race, we may never really know."

"How you expect to communicate with a dead race is beyond me," snipes Elleen.

Serba ignores her.

"You'd think with all the false Telen phenomena put together with the artifacts that we'd generate more interest," sniffs Eckart as he joins us after all.

"Who is going to shell out that much currency to come here?" is Elleen's response.

Eckart puts aside his mask and blows his nose. Serba clears her throat.

I return to examining the objects. Our faces reflect back at me and obscure my view until I readjust my position. Displays always seem to be built for taller people.

Even with the different angle, I discern nothing new. No residual energy or feelings that connect them to Glim's and my experience. I wish the answer were this easy. Glim's shoulders droop a bit. He looks over at me, "Nothing. You?"

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head. "Sorry, Serba. These aren't responsible. Nor do they suggest any meaning or use."

"I never really expected they would. I only hoped. Perhaps we'll learn more from the experiments next week. You should have started your tests by then as well." *And perhaps the disrupters will no longer be necessary*, she sends. Ishrug. Hope seems far away, given Madrin's position. She is, after all, a teleapist; her opinion carries the weight of the Interplanetary Department of Justice behind it.

The sky is flawless again today. We certainly picked the right season to emigrate. The other colonists, though, tell me MON will make up for it later with rain and eventually a vicious winter. At that point we will move into the colony proper. But today the deep indigo sky seems endless.

The Pool mirrors its surroundings with an almost rippleless skin. After today's break, the Monitor testing will continue tomorrow along with the start of the new series of experiments to contact the Ellysians. Since this will

involve, at the very least, wading into the Pool, Glim must be introduced to swimming.

I watch Glim make his way slowly through the shallows, with great trepidation. He looks back at me smiling like a child, but his eyes beg me to tell him, "It's okay, you don't have to learn how to swim." I smile back at him like a tolerant mother. Glim would probably capitalize the "m" in that word for doing this to him. A curious invective Glim claims comes from an old Earth colony, but he cannot be sure.

I only wish I could be going in with him, holding him up, rather than Serba with her thick blue neoprene gloves. Serba tells me she's a superb swimmer, but I still wish it was me teaching him. I've given up swimming for so long in deference to his fears. As it is, I can only shout encouragement and blandishments as the lesson progresses.

A zipper lands nearby. Madrin exits and comes over to me. Why can't she just leave us alone? "Are you feeling any better?" When we left Madrin and the testing yesterday, I was nearly too tired to walk.

"I'm still tired. Glim's stamina is better than mine. He's been after me lately about going to sleep every night instead of spending time with him."

"Interesting," she says with a hint of distaste. "Do you mind if I watch with you?"

I shrug. "You'll have to throw one negative comment for at least every three, otherwise Glim will get too cocky about his progress." As if we would ever have to worry about encouragement from Madrin, interrogator at large.

"I think I will remain silent and stoic on the shore."

I shrug again. How are our tests progressing? I want to ask. I almost do, but I am too angry at her for the silent wedge she's driven between Glim and me. I wonder how much of her distrust of our relationship comes from her telepst training. How much from irrational fear? How much from jealousy at our communion?

A splash calls my attention back to the Pool. Serba takes Glim in over his head. He seems to be floating pretty well, if cautiously. She keeps moving away from him for longer periods while he gets his balance and breathing regulated. Soon he is actually paddling about. Except for the first public moments after our "mind sex" I have never seen Glim look awkward. I love him all the more for it. I long to touch him, but I know standing here, especially with Madrin right next to me, that I can't...

The Pool stretches out, silver and unruffled, before us. The strange reflective properties of the water do not allow us to see the bottom. Two other zippers are on the other side of the water, and a separate group of people standing by the bank watches Glim's progress.

Some children toss a ball back and forth by the bank. It is one of the dense balls used to play fryondy. They throw it harder and harder at each other, waiting to see who will give up first. The one closer to the Pool finally ducks. The ball sails out over the edge, clips Glimmer on the forehead and then sinks. For a brief moment I think he is going to come out of the Pool and chase the boys about, all in good fun. Instead I see his eyes roll and he goes limp, slipping below the surface.

Serba immediately starts to swim to where he went down. My heartbeat races; the boys who were throwing the ball run away.

I start toward the Pool, but Madrin catches my arm. I react without thinking. *Let go*, I send at her. The Telen must be especially strong with our physical contact; all of my anger, frustration, and fear pour through it. Her face pales, and she wrenches her hand from my arm.

"Can you sense him?" she asks, her voice wavering.

Jump, commands the voice.

Serba resurfaces without Glim. I cannot wait any longer. I run for the Pool. I pour all of my Telen into the Pool searching for any wisp that might be Glim. If anyone can find him, it's me. I hear others diving in around me, but they search aimlessly. Blinded by the mirror of the water.

Glim's mind touches me. *I can't*, he says to no one in particular. *I can't*.

Something breaks the surface of the Pool, and without thinking I dive into the Pool toward it. When I break the surface, the hair on the back of my neck and on my lower arms is prickling, and the air seems to darken around me. A splash, and Glim surfaces in front of me, his forehead marred by an angry reddening bruise. Energy begins to fill me. The darkness intensifies, tinged with orange and white.

Can you touch the bottom? he asks.

Just barely, I think.

He reaches out to hold onto my arm, and the energy intensifies tenfold, bubbling through my body until I feel like I'll explode in a burst of white, black, and orange light.

The light breaks through the darkness over me, and looking up, I see in the black and brilliant orange two of them floating amid the miasmic colors.

The woman is beautiful, black hair, brown face. *The others are here*, she says, and I can sense them all; children, adults, the chaperon, all of them who dove into the Pool, the weave of Telen from a world of minds shaping the conduit we are floating in. They are pure spirit. *Come, join us*, she says. *I'm here to greet you. We've been waiting for you.*

I can't swim, says Glim, grabbing harder onto my arm, and I realize that white light and black and orange continue to surround me and now ooze out to envelop Glim as well. I can't touch bottom anymore.

I can't swim, Glim repeats. I sweep him up in my arms and hold him, his arms going around my neck; he isn't too heavy for me, which can't be right.

Don't worry, I assure him, *I'll teach you how.*

The more complete contact brings our minds together, and the meld is dizzying. Glim says, *I'm not sure.*

Glim, I love you. I promise you, I'll teach you how to swim. We'll always be together. Like this — not separated by a disrupter or a telepist or anything. The color and light are all around us, and we begin to float up, into it, our physicality bleeding away. The others around the Pool fade back into the other reality, further away every moment.

I look up at the woman. Her hair is silver now, and her shape wavers as the current moves around her. She is glorious, but the welcome I felt only moments before is now colored with something sour.

Drop him, she says to me.

What? is my response. I cannot have heard her. I can feel the thought of my heart begin to thump in my chest.

I said, drop him. He's weak like the others. Don't tie yourself to such a one, she repeats. *There's no reason for you to waste yourself on a lowly warrior. There are many more worthy for your attention.*

This is the Telen I have been hearing since our arrival. These are the Ellysians. The consequences rattle through my brain as we float, stunned by the light and beauty.

Jude, Glim's Telen seems to emanate from my own mind, *I can't swim*, he says. But what if I can't teach him? The woman keeps beckoning. We float without effort toward her, Glim trailing behind clinging to my arm. Drop him? No. Never.

No.

Resist, I say to Glim/me.

You *can't resist*, the Ellysian says. You've *already been altered*. You *can't survive in that dimension any longer*. We've been waiting for you. There are so many who want to see you.

Resist, I say. I can feel Glim joining with me to pull away from the Ellysian. The sinews of our minds weave together as one. *Resist*, we say. We start to slow. I look back toward the darkness where our world was only moments ago, the world where we worked together and sacrificed so much only to make a place for ourselves, a place that is tentative at best, but a place nonetheless.

The Ellysian speaks again, but I close my eyes to her, feeling Glim against me, embracing him. *This way*, she orders me. *Come this way*, her ordering turning to pleading.

No, we say. We continue to pull away. The darkness becomes our focus. Together we push away from the woman. She starts to fade as the darkness envelops us even as the conduit attempts to close about us. Weight reasserts itself, and our flesh begins to bubble, searing away from the bone. Hideous pain, but our minds are still joined.

You *will die*, she blasts, and I can sense her need, the need of her race, their need for the strength of my Telen. We feel her pull at me, trying to seduce me into coming to them, the salving effect of the light countering the burn of the darkness.

We will stay together. Struggling back to the physical world in an explosion of pain, a searing blaze of energy, a joined sharing on into infinity.

You *will die*, she screams again as we drift farther. *Look at what we offer you. Just look. How can you reject it? Life is better than the fate you are choosing*. Our pain ripples back up through her as our limbs wither, and we now understand the twisted artifacts in the Justice building.

Not apart. The conduit pulls at us more desperately.

No, she howls, *come back*.

Together. We resist.



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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE HAVE ENOUGH new writers' stories in inventory to spend the entire summer sharing them with you. But we know that you read *F&SF* to visit with old friends as well as to meet new talent. So in July, we'll have a new writer or two, but we'll also have some old friends.

F&SF favorite R. Garcia y Robertson provides July's cover story. "The Moon Maid" is an historical fantasy that reads like an old-fashioned pulp adventure story. Aganippe, the Moon Maid, is on a mission to kill a lion. Not just any lion, but the lion that murdered a human boy. The mission is fraught with not only physical danger, but emotional danger as well. Aganippe has many friends among the lions, and to kill the murderous lion, she will have to betray many whom she loves....

July's issue goes from the distant past to the far future. *F&SF* regular Michael Cassutt contributes a story about the future of space travel. It's a dark view, set aboard a ship called Mission, among Mission's residents, many of whom dream of Earth, a place they will never see. "The Longer Voyage" is one of the most important sf stories you'll see all year.

Nebula and World Fantasy Award Winner Jack Cady brings us back to the present with an exceptional novella. "Kilroy was Here" is about Death stalking the residents of a V.A. hospital, and about their decision to fight back. It's a story about a hopeless war, yet somehow Jack, with his lyrical prose, uses the tale to show the meaning of hope.

Future issues will bring even more old favorites, award-winners, and newcomers to our pages. Ray Bradbury returns, as does Michael Bishop. Gene Wolfe and John Crowley provide cover stories. Esther Friesner and George Alec Effinger contribute some rib-tickling humor. Harlan Ellison makes us think, and Tanith Lee tells us the reason that the stepmother didn't want Cinderella to go to the ball. All this and more in the second half of 1996, so keep your subscription current!

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NOT JUST CLEANING
THE APARTMENT.

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sure fool
me.

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